
魔法科高校の劣等生
The irregular at magic high school
夏休み編+1
5
佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration
石田可奈
Kana Ishida
電撃文庫


「達也さん、パラソルの下にいるだけじゃ、もったいないです」
光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。光を操る光波振動系魔法を得意とする。思い込みがやや激しいタイプ。
千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか
達也のクラスメイト。明るい性格で、周囲も巻き込むトラブルメーカー。実家は剣技と魔法の複合戦闘術である『剣術』の大家である。
「そんなこと言っちゃダメでしょ、美月。せっかく面白くなりそうなんだから」
北山 雫
きたやま・しずく
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。大出力の振動・加速系魔法を得意とする。一見表面上はクールな面持ちで、ほのかとは性格が対照的。
柴田美月
しばた・みづき
達也のクラスメイト。教室では主人公の隣の席。地味だが、「癒し系妹キャラ」として一部の上級生に高い人気を誇る。霊子放射光過敏症のため、この時代では珍しく眼鏡をかけている。
「これってまるで……恋人と妹の板挟みの図ですね」
「お兄様、折角海に来たのですから、泳ぎませんか？」
「達也さん、考え事？」
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
司波兄妹の妹。1年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。




## 明智英美
あけち・えいみ

1年B組。フルネームは、アメリア＝英美＝明智＝ゴールディ。愛称は「エイミィ」。イギリスの現代魔法の名門・ゴールディ家の娘。大質量の物体を短時間、高速で移動させる、俗に言う「砲撃魔法」を得意としている。

「俺とお前ならこの
有能な参謀がいるからな」

「……まったくあなたは将輝」

## 一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき

第三高校一年生のエース。高度な魔法も自在に操り、『クリムゾン・プリンス』の異名を持つ。十師族・一条家の次期当主。

## 吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう

第三高校の一年生。将輝の親友で参謀役。弱冠十三歳で魔法式の「基本コード（カーディナル・コード）」の一つを初めて発見した天才少年。それにちなんで、「カーディナル・ジョージ」と呼ばれる。


「――困ったわね。明日には生徒会選挙が公示されるのに、立候補者がいないなんて」
七草真由美
さえぐさ・まゆみ
魔法科高校の生徒会会長。十師族・七草家の長女。小柄な身体だが、体型はグラマー。遠隔精密魔法の分野で十年に一人の英才と呼ばれている。性格は小悪魔的。
服部刑部少丞範蔵
はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう
二年生。生徒会副会長。真由美からは「はんぞーくん」と呼ばれている。卓越した魔法力を持ち、真由美たち「三巨頭」に次ぐ実力者。
「……」
中条あずさ
なかじょう・あずさ
一見、中学生に見えそうな風貌だが、これでも魔法科高校二年生で生徒会書記。真由美からは「あーちゃん」と呼ばれている。情動干渉系魔法『梓弓』というレアなスキルを持つ。
「……わたしには無理です」
司波達也
しば・たつや
司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校の新入生。一年E組所属。『雑草（ウィード）』と揶揄される二科生徒。得意分野は魔法術式補助演算機（CAD）の設計など技術系。
「俺に票が集まるはずは無い」
「投票用紙を貸して下さい！誰が書いたのか、つきとめます！」

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佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

illustrator assistant／ジミー・ストーン、末永康子

design／BEE-PEE

# 魔法と魔法師

## ●魔法師

『魔法技能師』の略語。魔法技能師とは、実用レベルで魔法を行使するスキルを持つ者の総称。使用する魔法の種類が現代魔法であっても古式魔法であっても、一括りで『魔法技能師』と呼ぶ。但し、古式魔法の遣い手は自らを表現する際、『魔術師』『陰陽師』『行者』『忍び』などの伝統的な名称を好む。魔法師の資質を持つ者の比率はティーンエイジで千人に一人、成長期のストレスによる能力喪失で成人後は一万人に一人と言われているが、これはあくまでも「実用レベル」であって、「実戦レベル」の能力を持つ者になると更に希少な存在となる。

## ○魔法式

事象に付随する情報を一時的に改変する為の情報体。魔法師が保有するサイオンで構築されている。事象に付随する情報もサイオン情報体であり、魔法式はこれを改竄するコンピュータウイルスのようなものと言える。「世界」には時間的連続性を保とうとする修復力があり、その為に魔法式の効果は永続的なものとならない。但し、世界の修復力は時間的連続性を保つものであるから、十分な長期間、魔法による「改竄」が続けば、それが「事実」として「世界」に「定着」することもある。魔法治療は、この性質を利用している。

## ○魔法式の出力プロセス

魔法式の出力は次のプロセスをたどる。
❶起動式をCADから受信する。これを「起動式の読込」という。
❷起動式に変数を追加して魔法演算領域に送る。
❸起動式と変数から魔法式を構築する。このプロセスは魔法演算領域で自動的に行われ、魔法師本人にとってもブラックボックスである。
❹構築した魔法式を、無意識領域の最上層にして意識領域の最下層たる「ルート」に転送、意識と無意識の狭間に存在する「ゲート」から、イデアへ出力する。
❺イデアに出力された魔法式は、指定された座標のエイドスに干渉しこれを書き換える。
単一系統・単一工程の魔法で、この五段階のプロセスを半秒以内で完了させることが、「実用レベル」の魔法師としての目安になる。

## ○魔法の系統

伝統的な魔法は、発生させる現象を象徴元素に当て嵌めて術式を分類していた。代表的な分類は「地」「水」「火」「風」の四大、四大に「空」を加えた五　輪、「木」「火」「土」「金」「水」の五行など。「光」「闇」「虚」「無」「天」「月」「雷」「山」「沢」等が付け加えられることもある。超能力研究を端緒とする現代魔法は、現象をその見掛けの性質ではなく作用面から分析し分類した。
即ち、〔加速・加重〕〔移動・振動〕
〔収束・発散〕〔吸収・放出〕
以上、四系統八種類である。
無論、分類には必ず例外があって、現代魔法学においても四系統八種に分類できない魔法が認められている。例えば四系統八種は作用面に着目した分類だから、超心理学にいうESP、知覚器官外認識力、いわゆる「超感覚」は「知覚系魔法」として四系統魔法とは別分野の魔法とされており、この分野では超心理学的なアプローチも未だ健在である。学問研究上、魔法系統は細かく分類されているが、「事象に付随する情報を書き換えてその改竄を事象に反映させる」ことが魔法の唯一の本質であり、系統魔法もそれ以外の魔法もこの意味で同じものである。

## ○魔法の工程

現代魔法において工程という言葉には、魔法を発動するプロセスそのものと、目的とする事象改変を行う為に組み合わせられた複数の魔法の、一つ一つの魔法処理の二通りの意味を持つ。後者の意味では、例えば卵をキッチンからテーブルへ魔法で移動させる場合、加速、移動、加速、移動の四工程が必要となる。移動魔法は物体の速度と線形の座標を書き換える魔法であり、加速の工程を省略すると対象物に慣性を無視した加速が掛かる。卵であれば、割れてしまう。移動の工程を省いて加速と減速だけで処理しようとすると、卵は放物線軌道で飛んでいくことになり、恐ろしく精密な減速制御が必要になる。工程が増えても 加速魔法である程度まで減速をかけて、移動魔法で速度をゼロにする方が容易なのである。この四工程を合わせて、「卵をキッチンからテーブルへ移動させる」 という一つの魔法になる。一般論で言えば、民生用魔法は戦闘用魔法より多段階の工程が必要とされる。

## ○魔法の評価基準〔魔法力〕

サイオン情報体を構築する速さが魔法の処理能力であり、構築できる情報体の規模が魔法のキャパシティであり、魔法式がエイドスを書き換える強さが干渉力、この三つを総合して魔法力と呼ばれる。この他の要因、例えば保有するサイオンの量（魔法の発動回数限界に影響）や処理できる変数の数（魔法の自由度に影響）は魔法の評価に影響しない。魔法師はライセンス制度で管理されており、ライセンスA級～E級の査定もこの基準で行われる。

## ○魔法演算領域

魔法式を構築する精神領域。魔法という才能の、いわば本体。魔法師の無意識領域に存在し、魔法師は通常、魔法演算領域を意識して使うことは出来ても、そこで行われている処理のプロセスを意識することは出来ない。魔法演算領域は、魔法師自身にとってもブラックボックスと言える。

# Character
## キャラクター紹介



### 吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ

1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
古式魔法の名家。エリカとは
幼少時からの顔見知り。

### 司波達也
しば・たつや

1年E組。『雑草』と
揶揄される二科生(劣等生)。
全てに達観している。





### 光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
光波振動系魔法が得意。
思い込むとやや直情的。

### 司波深雪
しば・みゆき

1年A組。達也の妹。
主席入学した優等生。
冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する。





### 西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると

1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
硬化魔法が得意。明るい性格。



### 北山 雫
きたやま・しずく

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
振動・加速系魔法が得意。
感情の起伏をあまり表に出さない。

### 千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか

1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
剣術が得意。チャーミングな
トラブルメーカー。



### 柴田美月
しばた・みづき

1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
霊子放射光過敏症。
少し天然が入った真面目な少女。



**里美スバル**
さとみ・すばる
1年D組。美少年と見まごう少女。
明るくノリの良い性格。

**森崎 駿**
もりさき・しゅん
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
CAD早撃ちが得意。
一科生としてのプライドが高い。

**明智英美**
あけち・えいみ
1年B組。クォーターで、フルネームは
アメリア＝英美＝明智＝ゴールディ。

**七草真由美**
さえぐさ・まゆみ
三年生。生徒会会長。
魔法科生徒の中でも
その能力は歴代最高クラス。





**中条あずさ**
なかじょう・あずさ
二年生。生徒会書記。
オドオドした性格で
引っ込み思案。

**市原鈴音**
いちはら・すずね
三年生。生徒会会計。
冷静沈着な頭脳派。
真由美の右腕。





**服部刑部少丞範蔵**
はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう
二年生。生徒会副会長。
生真面目で優秀。

**渡辺摩利**
わたなべ・まり
三年生。風紀委員会委員長。
真由美の親友で、
物事全般にやや好戦的。



**辰巳鋼太郎**
たつみ・こうたろう
三年生。風紀委員。
豪快な性格の持ち主。

**沢木 碧**
さわき・みどり
二年生。風紀委員。
女性的な名前がコンプレックス。

**五十里 啓**
いそり・けい
二年生。魔法理論の成績は
学年トップ。千代田花音とは
許嫁同士。

**十文字克人**
じゅうもんじ・かつと
三年生。全クラブ活動の
統括組織である
部活連の会頭。



**千代田花音**
ちよだ・かのん
二年生。活発な印象の少女。
五十里啓とは許嫁同士。

**風間玄信**
かざま・はるのぶ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・隊長。
階級は少佐。

**真田繁留**
さなだ・しげる
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

**柳 連**
やなぎ・むらじ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

**山中幸典**
やまなか・こうすけ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
軍医少佐。一級の治癒魔法師。

**藤林響子**
ふじばやし・きょうこ
風間の副官を務める女性士官。
階級は少尉。

**桐原武明**
きりはら・たけあき
二年生。剣術部所属。
関東剣術大会中等部のチャンピオン。

**壬生紗耶香**
みぶ・さやか
二年生。剣道部所属。
中等部剣道大会女子部の全国二位。

**九重八雲**
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。
達也の体術の師匠。

**小野 遥**
おの・はるか
1年E組の総合カウンセラー。
いじられ気質だが、裏の顔も持つ。



**一条将輝**
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の一年生。
九校戦に出場。
十師族・一条家の次期当主。



**吉祥寺真紅郎**
きちじょうじ・しんくろう
第三高校の一年生。九校戦に出場。
「カーディナル・ジョージ」の
異名で知られている。

**九島 烈**
くどう・れつ
世界最強の魔法師の一人と目されていた人物。
敬意を以て「老師」と呼ばれる。

# Glossary
## 用語解説

### 魔法科高校
国立魔法大学付属高校の通称。全国に九校設置されている。
この内、第一から第三までが一学年定員二百名で一科・二科制度を採っている。

### ブルーム、ウィード
第一高校における一科生、二科生の格差を表す隠語。
一科生の制服の左胸には八枚花弁のエンブレムが刺繍されているが、
二科生の制服にはこれが無い。



一科生のエンブレム

### CAD〔シー・エー・ディー〕
魔法発動を簡略化させるデバイス。内部には魔法のプログラムが
記録されている。特化型、汎用型などタイプ・形状は様々。



司波深雪のCAD

司波達也の
CAD

### フォア・リーブス・テクノロジー〔FLT〕
国内CADメーカーの一つ。元々完成品よりも魔法工学部品で有名だったが、
シルバー・モデルの開発により一躍CADメーカーとしての知名度が増した。

### トーラス・シルバー
僅か一年の間に特化型CADのソフトウェアを十年は進歩させたと称えられる天才技術者。

### エイドス〔個別情報体〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてエイドスとは、事象に付随する情報体のことで、
「世界」にその「事象」が存在することの記録で、「事象」が「世界」に記す足跡とも言える。
現代魔法学における「魔法」の定義は、エイドスを改変することによって、
その本体である「事象」を改変する技術とされている。

### イデア〔情報体次元〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてイデアとは、エイドスが記録される
プラットフォームのこと。魔法の一次的形態は、このイデアというプラットフォームに
魔法式を出力して、そこに記録されているエイドスを書き換える技術である。

### 起動式
魔法の設計図であり、魔法を構築するためのプログラム。
CADには起動式のデータが圧縮保存されており、
魔法師から流し込まれたサイオン波を展開したデータに従って信号化し、魔法師に返す。

### サイオン（想子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、認識や思考結果を記録する情報素子のこと。
現代魔法の理論的基盤であるエイドス、現代魔法の根幹を支える技術である起動式や魔法式は
サイオンで構築された情報体である。

### プシオン（霊子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、その存在は確認されているがその正体、
その機能については未だ解明されていない。
一般的な魔法師は、活性化したプシオンを「感じる」ことができるにとどまる。

## *Magic and magicians*

**Magician:** Shorthand for [Magic Skills Expert]. A generic term for persons capable of using practical-level magic. Whether the magic used is Modern Magic or Ancient Magic, all are [Magic Skills Experts]. However users of Ancient Magic prefer traditional terms like [Sorcerer], [Medium], [Ascetic], or [Ninja] when introducing themselves. It is said that 1 in 1000 teenagers have magical talent and this becomes 1 in 10000 for adults after power loss due to stresses during growth phases, but this is entirely for [practical-level magic]; persons possessing [combat-level magic] are even rarer.

**Magic Sequence:** Information bodies meant to temporarily manipulate phenomenon-related information. These are constructed from a magician's stock psions. Phenomenon-related information are also psion information bodies, so magic sequences alter them like what computer viruses do. The [World] has the recovery strength to maintain temporal continuity, hence a magic sequence's effectiveness is only temporary. Given that fact, if sufficiently prolonged magic-induced [alteration] is kept up, it can be [established] as [reality] to the [World]. Magical therapy exploits this principle.

**Output Process of Magic Sequence:** Outputting magic sequences obey the following processes.

1. One receives the activation sequence from a CAD. This is called [activation sequence loading].
2. Variables are added to the activation sequence, then both are sent to the magic calculation zone.
3. The magic sequence is constructed from the activation sequence and the variables. This is automatically executed in the magic calculation zone, a black box process even to magicians themselves.

4. The constructed magic sequences are forwarded through the [Route] (it serves as the bottom layer of the conscious and the top layer of the unconscious), and outputted from the [Gate] (the threshold that exists in both conscious and unconscious mind) on to the [Idea].
5. The magic sequences being outputted to the [Idea] alter the Eidos at the specified coordinates, and so rewrite it.

In each magic system and magic process, completing these five processes in 0.5 second is the benchmark for a [practical-level] magician.

**Magic System:** Traditional magic classifies the techniques by applying symbolic elements to the phenomenon being activated. Model classifications include the major four elements ([earth], [water], [fire], [air]), the five rings ([sky] is added to the major four elements), and the wu xing ([wood], [fire], [earth], [metal], [water]). There are even cases when elements such as [light], [dark], [void], [nothingness], [divine], [lunar], [lightning], [mountain], and [valley] were added. Modern magic, with its roots from ESP research, are classified not from the perceived property but from its functionality.

Namely,

(Acceleration and Gravitation) (Movement and Oscillation)

(Convergence and Dispersion) (Absorption and Emission)

The above-mentioned is the four-system, eight-type magic taxonomic schema.

Of course it is known that there are always exceptions, magics that cannot be classified under modern magic's four-system eight-type schema. So for example, since the four-system eight-type is focused on functionality, ESP (aka parapsychology, extra-sensory perception) is classified as [Perception magic], separate from the the four-system eight type magics; in this division parapsycholgic approaches are still strong. In terms of scholastic research, the magic systems are finely classified; still [rewriting information that are attached to reality and

reflecting those alterations back to reality] is magic's only truth, and this applies to both classified and unclassified magics.

**Magic Processes:** In modern magic the term "magic processes" carry two meanings: one, the very processes to activate magic, and two, the combined singular and multiple magic processing for the purpose of performing the target alterations to reality. For the latter meaning, taking for example magic to relocate an egg from the kitchen to the table, the required processes would be acceleration, movement, acceleration, then movement. Movement magic rewrites an object's velocity and linear coordinates, and omitting the acceleration processes means an increase in acceleration that ignores a target object's inertia (this means one shattered egg). Omitting the movement processing and using only acceleration and deceleration processes means the egg will follow a parabolic trajectory, and this requires extremely fine deceleration control. Even with repeated deceleration processing, using movement magic to zero out the velocity is far easier. With these four processes, it becomes the magic of [relocating an egg from the kitchen to the table]. Prevailing view says civilian-use magics requires more processing stages than military-use magics.

**Magic Evaluation Standards (Magic Strength):** Magic throughput (how fast one can construct psion information bodies), magic capacity (how big one can construct psion information bodies), and interference strength (how strong one's magic sequences can rewrite the Eidos). These three together define magic strength. Other main factors like stock psion capacity (limits how many times one can activate magic) or multi-variable processing capability (influences the degrees of freedom for magic) are not counted towards magic strength. Magicians are controlled through a licensing system, and it is the norm for them to be assessed from A-rank to E-rank.

**Magic Calcuation Zone:** The mental zone when magic sequences are constructed. The wellspring for the ability called magic. It exists in a magician's unconscious mind, and while magicians are normally aware and make use of it they cannot sense the actual processes that

are being performed there. The magic calculation zone is said to be a sealed black box even among magicians.

## *Summer Break*

"Want to go to the sea?"

The one who had asked those words all of a sudden was Shizuku.

"By the sea, you mean the beach?"

Modern TV phone systems, as a standard, can take up to 10 calls simultaneously. As Miyuki used that system to talk with Shizuku and Honoka and engage in idle chatter, Shizuku gave a brief affirmative 'yes'. That answer was a bit short, but even so it seemed to ring a bell with her friend since primary school, Honoka.

"Ah, could you mean?"

"Yes, that."

But for Miyuki, who had only known them for around four months, this conversation was altogether on a different level.

"Could you mean..... what?"

At that, both Honoka and Shizuku realized that they had left Miyuki behind, albeit too late. They shared a glance. That being said, on Miyuki's display she could only see them looking aside. Honoka was then the first to direct her eyes back to Miyuki.

"Well you see, Shizuku's family has a resort in Ogasawara."

"Eh? Shizuku, your family owns a private beach?"

"Yeah....."

At Miyuki's question. Shizuku answered briefly again, although this time with a slightly embarrassed expression.

Recently, having a villa in the uninhabited island of Ogasawara had become fashionable among the rich, though this had been reproached by ignorant critics misunderstanding intellectual expression as 'arrogantly willful destruction of nature."

These uninhabited islands, where the resorts are, were mostly once populated islands, but had been abandoned due to the rough conditions. As these villas were zero emission (energy sources came from sunlight, so if you include energetics they weren't truly zero emission but still), they were not destructive to nature but rather unashamed valid uses of land. Of course, Miyuki wasn't blaming Shizuku('s family) for anything. It was just that even among those households considered wealthy, only a handful possessed villas with their own private beach. That was probably something Shizuku also understood, but even in the case of unjustified criticism she would probably retain a manner of general common sense and feel a subconscious degree of guilt.

"My father said to 'please invite your friends'. It seems he really wants to meet Miyuki and Tatsuya-san."

At Shizuku's words calibrated to change the mood (this being again something the one who had not known them very long didn't catch), Honoka mumbled something.

"So your father will be there as well this year....."

Her expression seemed to be recalling something, most likely memories of a previous vacation she had been on with Shizuku's father. Perhaps at the very villa they were talking about.

"Don't worry. He'll only be around for a short while. It seems he has a pile of work, and he'll probably just be able to spare a few short hours."

Honoka's somewhat apprehensive face softened in relief at Shizuku's words. Miyuki felt curiosity at just what could have happened, but she didn't lose sight of priorities.

"I don't mind, but..... what time?"

"It hasn't been decided yet. We had been thinking whenever it's convenient for Tatsuya-san."

At Miyuki's expression saying 'I need to ask Onii-sama', Shizuku understood perfectly well her answer.

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"......is what we were talking about."

Tatsuya heard of the matter during breakfast the next morning.

At first Tatsuya had considered asking 'did you guys talk about that all the way until midnight?', but of course what came out of his mouth was different altogether.

"The only ones attending will be Shizuku, Honoka, and ourselves?"

"Shizuku said she also wants to invite Erika, Mizuki, Saijou-kun, and Yoshida-kun."

At that Miyuki hesitated slightly,

"But they're not as familiar with them as us, so they wondered if we could be the ones to invite them."

She probably didn't want to say anything which would bring inconvenience to her brother. Of course, Miyuki didn't intend to make Tatsuya do anything and was going to contact them herself, but.

"I got it. Then, I'll contact Leo and Mikihiko. For dates, let's see....."

Conversely, Tatsuya also didn't want to impose on his sister, resulting in a pre-established harmony.

Taking a sip of coffee, Tatsuya went over the schedule in his head.

"......I'm free next week Friday to Sunday. Every other day is pretty busy."

Summer break for magic high schools runs until the end of August. (For most science and literary high schools it's mid August, while for most PE and arts high schools it's mid September.)

Tatsuya's summer break last year and the year before last had been mostly taken up by training with the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

(In addition to that last year had been studying — namely, tutoring Miyuki.)

This year the first half had been taken up by the Nine Schools Competition, so things were extra tight. Developments involving the soon to be released next month 'dedicated magic flight device' were also in motion.

This year as well, there was no 'break' in his summer break.

"So that's next Friday to Sunday, three days and two nights. I'll contact Shizuku."

Which was why Miyuki was so fired up about not missing this opportunity. To her it was a little disappointing that she wouldn't be spending time alone with just her brother, but giving him time to refresh took priority over any of her own desires.

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It seemed Shizuku really had been leaving her plans open for Tatsuya, as she immediately nodded upon receiving Miyuki's call. Honoka was contacted by Shizuku, Erika and Mizuki by Miyuki, Leo and Mikihiko by Tatsuya, and whether the fact that everyone was free was a coincidence or not Tatsuya took with a grain of salt.

And on the day of travel he had looked on in blank amazement. He had been forced to accompany the ladies out shopping, a very attention grabbing event in the swimsuit section of a large department store; Tatsuya later relegated this memory to a distant drawer in the depths of his mind and welded it shut, hence there was no recollection of that particular event here.

For some reason, the specified meeting place was not the airport but the Hayama marina.

"Wooow..... that sure is a nice boat."

This time (unlike during the Nine Schools Competition) Erika's short pants weren't out of place, so she looked up at the gleaming white hull even as she showed off her sleek shapely legs, her eyes shining.

"Doesn't Erika's family have a cruiser as well?"

As Shizuku questioned her with a slightly embarrassed face (Tatsuya had become quite adept at reading her expressions), Erika shook her head with a wry smile.

"We do have a ship, but it can't really be called a 'cruiser'..... Heck, I don't want to call it that.

They normally turn the stabilizer off too, so it's the worst ride ever."

".....don't tell me, for training?"

"Yep."

"You guys really are quite thorough....."

Next to Miyuki's murmur and amazed expression, Mizuki was at a loss as to what kind of face to make, so she just smiled ambiguously.

On the other hand,

"A Fleming propulsion system is it..... there aren't any air ducts, so the power doesn't come from gas turbines. Is it powered by photocatalytic hydrogen plants and fuel cells?"

Engrossed as he was in the boyish(?) interest of mechanics, Tatsuya muttered to himself as he observed the propulsion in detail.

"There're also hydrogen storage tanks onboard just in case."

An unexpected answer came. (It wasn't that the answer itself was unexpected, but rather the fact that an answer came at all.) Looking up, the 'captain' of the ship was there.

With a Greek hat pulled low over his face and dressed in a jacket with decorative buttons, he was politely munching on a pipe.

He simply lacked that stout look slightly.

Obesity as a lifestyle disease had been eradicated 20 years earlier thanks to drug treatment, but if cosplaying a captain a bit more girth is desirable.

As Tatsuya thought so with a puzzled face, the 'captain' extended a handshake. By the way, the pipe he held in his left hand really was a classic pipe. —If you looked closely enough, you'd see it was empty.

"You're Shiba Tatsuya-kun, aren't you? I am Kitayama Ushio, Shizuku's father."

He wasn't quite able to contain his confusion at this franker-than-expected personality, but Tatsuya had far more social experience than most high school students. Rather than succumbing to embarrassment, he returned the greeting flawlessly.

"It's good to meet you, I am Shiba Tatsuya. I have heard much about you. Along with my sister, we are pleased to make your acquaintance."

"It's good to meet you too."

Taking Shizuku's father's proffered hand, Tatsuya intended to squeeze lightly so as to not violate etiquette, but Ushio heartily grabbed Tatsuya's hand.

His grip was unexpectedly firm. Still, compared to Kazama and Yanagi, his hands were more accustomed to desk work. What caught Tatsuya was not the force of his hand but the power in the gaze he directed at him. Those hard-bitten eyes appraised you without making you feel uncomfortable, took the lead, strove with similar luminaries; the eyes of a leader.

".....not just a smart-ass good only for his brains. Not just a techie with superficial excellent techniques either.

Appearance truly seems superbly dependable."

His murmur would normally be inaudible. As even Tatsuya had to consciously concentrate, that volume of voice was more than quiet enough for consideration. But even if it had been uttered in a normal volume, Tatsuya would not have considered it discourteous. Kitayama Ushio possessed the majesty to honestly appraise the value of the one in front of him.

—But.

"Yes, it seems Shizuku's eyes weren't mistaken. While my daughter, she really does have it together."

At this sudden doting parent remark, Tatsuya ostensibly kept his expression neutral while sighing "so this is the great 'Kitayama Ushio' huh....." in his mind.

When he had said that he had heard of him earlier, that had not been mere politeness.

It's now normal to use a business name rather than your real name in the management of a company to protect your privacy. His own father does not use his name of 'Shiba Tatsurou' but rather the name 'Shiibara Tatsurou'[1] in his capacity as head of development at FLT.

He had only heard from Shizuku that her father managed a business in passing, but after being told his business name, he had been quite surprised that he was such a bigshot.

He had married late (marrying a magician had involved numerous issues and although those were overcome, it had taken years) so he really should have been over 50 or so, but this frank, or rather excessively light air, didn't seem to make him any more than 40.

"—Miyuki!"

Giving notice with a glance, Tatsuya called his sister over.

Miyuki came over at a trot, immediately assessed the situation, and bowed gracefully to Shizuku's father.

"Pleased to meet you, I am Shiba Miyuki. Thank you so much for inviting us over."

"Thank you for your kind words, milady. I am Kitayama Ushio. Such a lovely greeting from such a beautiful maiden is an unhoped honor both for me and my ship."

At his placing his hand on his chest and giving a deep bow, Miyuki also with a playful smile curtsied in the Western manner.

Being faced with a beauty of Miyuki's stature and bearing, it couldn't be helped that even Ushio's jaw slackened a bit.

"Ah, father. I don't think you said any such thing when you met me?"

"Dad, it's undignified so please close your mouth."

However, there was no way that would be tolerated. At Ushio's hapless appearance, a sudden barrage of words flew from two more ladies who came up.

"No no, it's not like I was opening my mouth or anything....."

If he had only been up against his true daughter, he might have been able to make something up, but also being faced with Honoka who he had loved as another daughter since primary school, even this talented businessman floundered. (Incidentally the reason Honoka had been so apprehensive at hearing that Ushio was coming might be due to him seeing her as his daughter, every time they met he had passed not inconsiderable amounts of pocket money on to her.)

Gesturing wildly at Erika and the others who were approaching from a distance, he was obviously trying to distract the others from the topic at hand.

"—Ooh! You must be new friends of my daughter as well? Welcome. Please enjoy yourselves.

Unfortunately I have to go now, but please feel free to relax as if it were your own home."

It was probably out of his depth dealing with his daughter unlike his business partners. His unrest could be discerned from his disjointed words.

Watching him rush into a large car with indecent haste and lifting his Greek hat in regret as he sped off, Tatsuya muttered 'I think he had at least wanted to sail with his daughter.....' in a voice no one could hear.

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It was around 900 km to the island archipelago where the villa was located.

Tatsuya didn't quite understand what the fun of sailing rather than flying was (it's not unusual now to privately own VTOL propeller aircraft, and in fact that would be cheaper than a Fleming propelled cruiser), and upon asking Leo and Erika, he was simply told something like 'this is the most charming way to travel'. He almost inadvertently retorted 'the point of the trip is swimming, not traveling', but had settled for muttering 'these two really are a perfect pair' under his breath.

Well, everyone had come along, and no one should be seasick. Taking into account the travel time, they had gathered at 6 am early in the morning. In order to leave as quickly as possible, Tatsuya got on the ship.

The deck was even larger than it appeared from outside. There wasn't a pool or theater or any such extravagant things (this was a 'cruiser' not a 'luxury liner' after all), but even if eight people got out deck chairs and hung up fishing rods, there would still be plenty of space to spare.

—However, since the entire deck was covered by a transparent dome streamlined for air resistance, it would be impossible to actually hang out any lines.

"But, when cruising at low speeds the sides are opened."

The one who explained that was the helmsman, as well as the one who had taken care of their belongings, the omni-housekeeper Ms. Kurosawa.

From her appearance..... rather than housekeeper, it felt there should be a more appropriate word. She didn't seem any older than her mid-twenties at most.

Though that being said she didn't give off a soft image, as she seemed more the type to come accompanied by the 'snap' SFX; still on the open sea under the blazing sun in mid summer, however much excess rays the dome could be said to cut out, Tatsuya had to wonder if she wasn't hot in that dress. Or maybe that was just him.

Firmly wrapped up in a long sleeved summer jacket as he was, he probably wasn't quite qualified to be thinking such things.

The ship's design placed the wheelhouse at the bow, the cabins beneath, and the transparent dome extending from the top of the wheelhouse all the way to the back half which was the deck.

After confirming all seven passengers were aboard, Kurosawa proceeded straight to the wheelhouse, and soon the ship had left the coast.

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The weather was calm throughout, and although there were some rough patches, thanks to the stabilizers and motion absorption systems no one on-board suffered motion sickness. At length, the ship eventually made it to the villa at Nakodojima island.

The atolls around the island had been devastated by feral goats in the latter half of the last century. After that, efforts to restore an artificial reef were unsuccessful. Later, villas were built, and the red clay that had been dredged up onto the coast were used via private funds to create a pier and sandy beach. This was what the 'intellectuals' had been decrying as 'destruction of nature'.

However, at the time the islands had been inhabited, there had been no destruction and it had been the people who had cleared out the feral goats as well. Did the destruction of nature occur because there were people, or did it occur only after they left?

He had been lost in such idle thoughts, but coming back to reality and in the face of the fact that he too had come to play at that very same sandy pier, he had to admit he was in no position to critique.

As could be inferred from his monologue, they had already arrived at the beach.

The sand was white and the sun dazzling.

But the beach was even more dazzling than that.

"Tatsuya-kun~, wanna swim?~"

"Onii-sama~, the water's cool and very nice.~"

As Erika and Miyuki called out from the beach, Tatsuya, under the shade of a parasol positioned into the beach, shook his hands with a vague smile.

—Too dazzling.

What was dazzling, by the way, were the swimsuit clad girls frolicking around on the beach.

The first to catch one's eyes would probably be Erika's flashy colored one-piece. It was a simple design with no frills which brought out and enhanced her slender proportions.

Next to her, waving her hands was Miyuki in a floral-print one-piece. Her femininity increased with each passing day, and the bold pattern served to emphasize her vibrant fairy-like charm.

The surprise was Mizuki. While her polka-dot patterned separate swimsuit wasn't as revealing as a bikini, the deep cut at the chest area showed off her ample assets, and it was impossible to link her to her usual docile image. Perhaps because of her narrow shoulders and hips, the slender curve of her waist resulted in a particular attractiveness.

Likewise in a separate swimsuit, Honoka had a pareo wrapped around one shoulder giving off an asymmetric style of mature air. If not simply considering size, but curves, this was probably the best proportioned one out of them all.

On the other hand, Shizuku was in a girlish swimsuit laden with frills. Even so, however, she continued to wear her grown-up detached expression, the two combining to create a perverted mysterious charm.

Staring at this sight made Tatsuya feel peculiarly uncomfortable deep inside, and he shifted his gaze.

To the side, flashy waves of water rose.

Leo and Mikihiko were having a (swimming) competition.

As Tatsuya watched, Leo seemed to be right in his element, while Mikihiko was desperately trying to catch his stride. .....For some inexplicable reason it made him recall a sense of intimacy.

Looking further into the distance, towards the horizon, he gradually let his consciousness drift away.

For a while, he immersed himself in solitude.

Then suddenly, he felt the presence of people.

Glancing at the bodies around him — Tatsuya complimented himself for managing not to utter a sound.

Five people were bent over looking at his face.

This would have been problematic in a normal situation, never mind in swimsuits.

"Tatsuya-san, thinking?"

Shizuku asked as she bent over him from the front at the waist, her hands on her lap. Looking from this angle, it appeared that Shizuku's body wasn't as childlike as he had imagined. Of course, that wasn't something he said aloud. Likewise, staring was obviously out of the question.

"Onii-sama, we finally came all this way to the sea, so won't you come swim?"

"That's right. Just camping under the parasol like this all day would be a waste."

With Miyuki on the left and Honoka on the right, surrounding him in a similar posture to Shizuku, there was no escape for his eyes wherever he looked.

Behind Shizuku, innocently waiting for his reply was Mizuki, and next to her was Erika wearing that evil grin of hers. Leaving things like this would be very bad. With no clear reason why, Tatsuya severely felt so.

"Fair enough, I guess I will."

Getting to his feet and brushing sand off his trunks, he casually removed himself from the line of sight of those five charming figures. While keeping his eyes firmly down, he took off his yacht parka.

As the parka hit the sand, the mood visibly changed.

Oh crap, Tatsuya thought, but it was already too late.

"Tatsuya-kun, those are....."

Erika couldn't hide the tension in her voice.

What those were soon became clear. Not just Tatsuya, but Mizuki, Honoka, and Shizuku all readily realized just what Erika had been so nervously surprised about. The eyes of those maidens were glued to 'those' on his body.

Underneath the parka hid a body forged of steel. The thickness of the muscle wasn't anything surprising. It didn't even quite approach the volume of an adult's body. But even whilst boyish, the chest and abdominal muscles were heavily toned and firm, almost like a Renaissance sculpture.

There was one feature there that sculptures lacked however — criss-crossing all over the skin were innumerable scars.

Many were cuts.

Just as many were punctures.

There were some minor burn marks in places.

Oddly enough there was no trace of fractures, but even accounting for that it was not a body raised in a usual way.

Mere normal training could never do this.

Nor could simply training until your blood ran.

Only actually being cut, stabbed, and burned, until blood flowed as if under torture, or perhaps the training itself was torture; could produce such a body. Precisely because Erika understood, she didn't scream out loud.

"Tatsuya-kun... you, just what..."

"Sorry, it's not something pleasant to look at."

Returning an irrelevant answer to that unspoken question, Tatsuya averted his eyes from Erika and stretched out for his just discarded parka.

But his hand couldn't reach it. That which he should have dropped in the sand a moment ago, was now firmly held tight against Miyuki's chest as she knelt at his feet.

Although his sister, he would not allow his hand to go near a lady's chest, so his left arm ended up wandering aimlessly through the air. Fortunately, there was no need to worry about retracting it. Because the moment he rose, his left arm was enveloped by Miyuki's right arm.

"Wah!"

The one who had raised her voice in surprise was Mizuki. In close contact, Miyuki's chest was pressed against Tatsuya's arm with only a thin swimsuit between them. At that however, Miyuki showed not a hint of embarrassment.

"Onii-sama, it's fine."

Miyuki's face was faintly red, but it came not from any shame at clinging to him half-naked.

"I know. That every one of these scars, is proof of the pain Onii-sama went through to become stronger than anyone."

But rather from looking deep into his eyes at such close range.

"So, I don't think Onii-sama's body is anything to be ashamed of."

At Miyuki's words, Tatsuya's expression softened slightly. Then, he felt the impact of something soft pressing on his right arm.

Erika gave a low whistle. It wasn't in ridicule, but rather in praise.

He was pretty sure he already knew who it was, but nonetheless he turned his head to verify the presence wrapped around his right arm.

As expected, it was Honoka. Almost as if competing with Miyuki, she hugged Tatsuya's arm tight with both hands. Unlike Miyuki, she was wearing a separate swimsuit, so Tatsuya's arm was touching her soft skin directly. Whether because of that, Honoka's face was three times as red as Miyuki's.

"I, I don't mind either!"

Despite fumbling at the start, she began to talk rapidly after that. Probably as a matter of course, an act which would be natural for lovers being acted upon on someone of the opposite sex, while in a swimsuit, was far too bold. It would be even weirder if she wasn't this nervous.

Although speaking of weird, what was weirder was Honoka's actions.

For a teenage girl, no, even a woman rich in life experience, the scars engraved all over Tatsuya's body should be something hard to face. If there were only a few small ones there might not be any problems, but those scars would normally be associated with events of terror.

Tatsuya could only suppose that removing his parka in front of those girls despite knowing that was a stupid moment of carelessness, perhaps caused by the blazing tropical sun, he thought bitterly.

That aside Erika's reaction, while rare, was nonetheless understandable. And as far as he was concerned he had long ago given up trying to classify Miyuki's words and actions with anything that could be considered as 'normal'. But what was behind Honoka's actions was a mystery to him. It was almost as if—

"It's almost like... being caught between your sister and your girlfriend isn't it?"

"Hey, shh! You can't say that Mizuki. Things had finally gotten interesting and all."

Mizuki's words were likely not desultory, but rather simply her honest thoughts. Tatsuya understood that perfectly well, but he nonetheless wholeheartedly agreed with Erika's words 'you can't say that'. The second part however he couldn't agree with at all.

But in between the first and second half of that sentence, Erika's voice notably changed. Her reservation disappeared. Mizuki's voice was the same as usual throughout.



With that evil grin Erika backed away slightly from Tatsuya, who was futilely trying to deal with Honoka still wrapped firmly around his arm (he had long since stopped caring about Miyuki).

"Uh, sorry Tatsuya-kun. I showed a strange attitude."

"No, I don't mind. So Erika, please don't mind anything either."

"Even if you tell me not to... ah, that's right!"

I've just thought of something good, her expression said, as that smile lit up her face once more.

"I will properly show my atonement as well."

As she said so she hooked the thumb of her right hand under the shoulder strap of her swimsuit and with a wink, lifted it about the width of a finger.

Next to Erika, Mizuki stiffened.

With Honoka still rapidly chattering away without lifting her head, and Miyuki looking up at him with that perfect smile, Tatsuya turned to alternatively look at the two girls still clinging to his arm.

"Let's go swim."

With the two of them still firmly attached to his arms, Tatsuya began to awkwardly proceed towards the beach.

Erika puffed out her cheeks, while Mizuki smiled vacantly lost in her own world.

Passing those two and catching up to Tatsuya's crowd, Shizuku nodded and simply said 'well done' to the back of the girl on the right.

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A brilliant blue sky spread out overhead before Tatsuya. Floating on his back in the calm sea (only his almost submerged face rose over

the surface of the water), the only sensation was the lapping of the waves.

Just a while earlier a water fight had ensued, with what could be called 'jetstreams' flying everywhere (of course as if by magic, it was decided the enemy was Tatsuya); however, five girls on one guy was too much of a mental strain even for him. If Leo and Mikihiko had been around he might have been able to hang on a little longer, but the two of them must have been engaged in some serious long distance swimming as they were no longer in sight. When he had said 'I'll be off for a bit' and turned his back to those five, Miyuki's face seemed to be filled with frustration, but as expected she understood his discomfort well.

Now the ladies were playing on a boat. The location was a beach close to where Tatsuya was drifting. Keeping a distance so as not to disturb him but within eye-shot seemed to be a compromise Miyuki, then the rest of the girls, had settled upon.

The happy voices of the girls carried over on the breeze to where he lay. Most of it was not conversation but simply senseless shrieking, yet without even looking by analyzing the pushions they were emitting he could grasp what they were likely to be doing. Honoka and Shizuku were on the boat, Miyuki and Erika in the water around the sides, and Mizuki should be sitting about under a parasol on the beach.

While being rocked by those gentle waves, Tatsuya remembered something. Honoka had said she wasn't a very good swimmer. Though she was in a boat it wasn't particularly big, nor was it particularly stable, and he wondered if it was alright for her to come so far out.

That ominous premonition turned out to be right on the money. Whether the power of language or a flag as it's designated by various people, the idea was that unfortunate possibilities if put into words would transcend theory into reality. That doesn't simply apply to

words uttered from the mouth, but thoughts formed in the mind as well.

A scream suddenly cut through the calm summer air. Tatsuya perceived the capsizing event as information faster than the eye could see, and immediately rose onto the surface of the water and began sprinting full throttle towards the boat. It was a movement technique he would normally never use if others were around to see, but it sure was a heck of a lot faster than swimming.

Running up next to the capsized boat, Tatsuya in one step had continuously been Flash Casting a surface tension amplification magic to achieve an effect like a 'water spider'.

Tatsuya dived feet-first into the water. Following Miyuki's gestures who had dived in earlier, Tatsuya hooked his hand around Honoka's waist. In an understandable state of panic, Honoka was wildly flailing her limbs, kicking away even as Tatsuya brought her up to the surface of the water.

Above him, Erika had pushed Shizuku back onto the boat. Either Erika or Shizuku had righted the overturned craft. Tatsuya decided to think about just how they had managed that later, and took Honoka towards the boat.

Ever since making it back onto the surface of the water she had calmed somewhat, but she was still in a relatively agitated state. Desperately and unreasonably resisting being led to the boat, she kept pleading 'please wait a bit!' and 'I beg you!'. However, just by being in the hot water of that summer sea would sap her depleted strength further. Because of her weakened state, it was necessary to have her rest inside the boat. Tatsuya reluctantly shook his head, and forcibly lifted Honoka's body into the vessel. The momentum propelled half of her body inside, and before she could rise she was restrained by Shizuku. Seeing her up close from the front, Tatsuya suddenly realized why she had been so reluctant.

The swimsuit Honoka had been wearing had probably been designed with fashion foremost in mind, and swimming practicality after.

Her swimsuit was missing the top.

Tatsuya shut his eyes tightly, and wordlessly allowed the gravity from his lift to carry him back down beneath the waves.

A fresh scream rent the peaceful air, as Honoka crouched down and covered her chest with both hands.

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"Hic, hic, sniff..."

"Uh, uhmm, is there something... Honoka-san, are you alright...?"

Upon reaching the beach she had broken down and began crying in earnest, and in confusion Mizuki who didn't know what had happened was trying to comfort her. The other three — Shizuku, Erika and Miyuki stood around the two in abject embarrassment.

"Hic... that's why, hic... I told him... sniff, to waaait..."

Of course, the one who felt the most awkward was Tatsuya. Truth be told, he would have wanted nothing more than to run away.

However, this wasn't something he could just hide from.

"That, well... Tatsuya-kun was just trying to help..."

Erika's words naturally had no effect. Miyuki wasn't able to find words for either party, not even Tatsuya.

"Honoka, I uh... I'm sorry."

Tatsuya himself had had no malicious intent, and although he held no accountability in that regard, he couldn't just keep an indifferent face. Thinking so Tatsuya bowed low, as Shizuku whispered something in Honoka's ear.

"Honoka, you know that Tatsuya-san isn't to blame."

A quiet voice only Honoka could hear.

"He gave you plenty of time to fix your clothing after."

Despite the small volume, and despite the numerous contradictions, Shizuku's words seemed to have a calming effect.

"This wasn't exactly according to plan, but..."

However, it also seemed something suspicious had gotten mixed into those comforting words.

"This is a good chance."

That line was somewhat conspiratorial.

Shizuku had a few more inspirational words with her, then Honoka finally looked up.

"Tatsuya-san... are you really sorry?"

"I am being perfectly sincere. I truly am very sorry."

As Tatsuya bowed again, Honoka muttered "Then..."

"...just for today, listen to everything I say."

"Come again?"

At those totally unexpected words, confusion settled on Tatsuya's face. Honoka didn't fit the image of someone who would say something like that at all. Not just Tatsuya, but Miyuki and Erika wore similar expressions.

"If you do, I'll forgive you. Is that ok...?"

Tatsuya and Miyuki exchanged glances.

Miyuki's crooked smile seemed to suggest 'it can't be helped'.

"...If that's what you want."

Although she had said 'whatever she says', he knew she wasn't a girl who would make malicious requests like in the 'King's game' that was

popular several decades ago. As he nodded yes, Honoka happily cried 'it's a promise!' with a broad smile.

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By the time Leo returned from his looo-o-ong (both in distance and duration) swim, he was just in time for tea on the balcony.

Cold drinks and colorful fruits were arrayed all over the table.

The acting waiter Kurosawa didn't wear a costume underneath her apron, but a light, mini one-piece. Her shoulders were bare, and her slender limbs peeked out from behind the apron that was larger than the dress itself. The sheer sex appeal it exuded would have instantly attracted the eyes of any teenage male, but today there were four more powerful swimsuits alongside her.

Taking a step back and looking maturely, two were beauties and two had already surpassed the level of the word beauty. For Leo, however, who distinctly felt 'food before romance' before these four swimsuit clad forms, not even Kurosawa's 'adult appeal' was a match for him.

But that didn't mean he was insensitive. Recognizing those four swimsuits, Leo remarked 'oh?' as he looked around.

"Where are... Tatsuya and Mitsui?"

"They're in, the boat, way over there."

The answer came not from the table, but from behind.

Tired all over and dripping seawater, Mikihiko breathlessly answered as he pointed.

Tatsuya and Honoka were heading out to sea in a retro rowboat.

"...What the heck's going on?"

"Stuff happened. Yeah, stuff."

At Leo's question, Erika answered toothily.

Rather than curt, that expression was almost a sulk, and as she turned away, Leo, rather than being offended had his curiosity piqued further.

Seeing Mikihiko watching the scene with interest, he also immediately looked over to sea.

Wearing a straw hat, Tatsuya's expression was hidden under its shade and indiscernible.

Honoka held a parasol and had her back turned to them, so her expression likewise couldn't be seen.

Even so as the small boat receded from the shore, Mikihiko could feel the exceedingly peaceful air they gave.

"...That's quite the nice atmosphere isn't it?"

"You two, hey,"

You morons, she left unsaid.

Even as Erika freaked out, a cold air cut through the room from the opposite seat.

Snap snap snap... Mikihiko could hear these ominous sounds coming from the girl sitting next to him, reminiscent of deepest winter.

"Mikihiko-kun, won't you have a chilled orange?"

Talking affably, Miyuki laughed as she passed a far too cold orange to Mikihiko.

With perfect timing, Kurosawa passed him a spoon.

Mechanically, Mikihiko took the sorbet spoon from her.

Miyuki had another piece of fruit in her hands. Once again, that snap snap snap... sound could be heard, and immediately she was holding a raw mango sorbet. Removing her frozen gaze from the fruit she had been staring at, she offered it to the person across from her with another bright smile.

"Saijou-kun, won't you have one too?"

"Ah... thanks..."

Leo decided that answer would be for the best.

Miyuki directed her gaze back at the mountain of fruit before her, but perhaps losing interest, glumly looked away.

"Shizuku, I'm sorry, but I feel a bit tired. Could I rest somewhere for a while please?"

"It's fine, don't worry. Kurosawa-san?"

"Of course. Miyuki-ojousama, right this way."

Following Kurosawa, Miyuki slid away into the villa.

Compared to Mizuki's cringing expression, Shizuku's signature poker-face was a marked contrast.

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Dinner was a barbecue.

Eight people gathered harmoniously around the console, with Miyuki perhaps calming down after resting going back and forth between the table and the barbecue.

Before going off to incessantly pester Tatsuya, Honoka happily chatted away with Erika and Shizuku.

Perhaps because of the trauma incurred during teatime, Mizuki sat away from Miyuki and the others, engaging in conversation with Mikihiko.

Leo was wolfing food down with gusto. Kurosawa was almost exclusively serving him.

Of course the groupings weren't exclusive, with Honoka joining Miyuki's group sometimes, and Tatsuya getting into a foodfight with Leo.

But somehow — somehow compared to usual, there was an awkward air floating in between them.

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It was the calm before the storm.

It's impossible to be sure of what will happen, but something definitely was going to happen — the one who broke that position and raised the curtain, was someone unexpected.

As soon as the card game the five girls had been playing ended in Mizuki's defeat, Shizuku asked Miyuki "Will you come with me for a bit?"

"...Sure."

Her confusion lasted only for a second.

Almost immediately, Miyuki was smiling again.

"...Um, are you guys going for a walk? I'll come too."

"You can't Mizuki. You have to go through the punishment game."

As Mizuki rose to follow after Miyuki, Erika grabbed her by the shirt and pulled her back down.

"Ehhh!? I didn't hear anything about that!"

"The loser obviously has to go through a punishment game. Anyway with that being said, you two take care."

Whether reading the air or not Erika subtly bound Mizuki, and pretending not to notice the tensions between them she waved Miyuki and Shizuku off.

The ones who sensed the tense atmosphere weren't just the ladies. After finishing dinner, Leo grabbed the pudding and took off, probably realizing the situation and Mikihiko, who was unable to concentrate on his game of chess, shot side glances at the girls.

"Checkmate. 10 more moves."

"Ehh, already!?"

Cried out at Tatsuya's ruthless sentence.

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Leaving the villa, they turned left onto the beach.

Shizuku walked on in silence, and Miyuki followed in silence.

They proceeded in that way and when the lights of the villa could no longer be seen, Shizuku turned around.

Her normally expressionless face was tense.

Miyuki simply smiled, but that expression was an archaic smile from which no emotions could be read.

"Sorry for making you accompany me all this way."

"It's fine. Is there something you wanted to talk about?"

Even at Miyuki's prompting however, she couldn't bring herself to immediately cut to the chase.

After counting 10 rounds of waves washing gently over the shore, Shizuku opened her mouth.

"I want to know."

"About what?"

"Just how does Miyuki feel about Tatsuya-san?"

At Shizuku's question without any covering or roundabout approach, without any explanation or reason of intent,

"I love him."

Miyuki answered in a single word with absolute calm.

"...Is that, as a man?"

Rather, the one who seemed upset was Shizuku. She keeping her cool was probably just another aspect of her personality.

"No."

Miyuki's answer came without the slightest hesitation.

Her expression was serene.

"I love and respect Onii-sama more than anyone. But, that's not as a woman. These feelings I have for my brother are not romantic love. There could never be such a love between him and I."

Meeting Shizuku's gaze,

"I'm curious to know, why would you ask such a question of me?"

She gave a sly grin.

"It's fine. I have no intention to interfere with Honoka whatsoever. ...Just so you know, I will feel really jealous though?

So rest assured, although I guess that's going to be difficult."

As Miyuki gave a light laugh, Shizuku's expression seemed to be nearing tears.

"...Why."

"Why what?"

"Why...do you try to detach yourself like that? I mean, when it's so evident that you love Tatsuya-san so much."

Miyuki took a step towards Shizuku.

Shizuku visibly stiffened, but, she didn't flinch.

Miyuki walked past her in that way, until they were back to back.

"...It's difficult to explain the relationship between us siblings to someone else. There are too many speculations intertwined. But the feelings I have towards Onii-sama are not so simple as that."

"...Are you really siblings?"

As Shizuku turned around,

"You've asked a pretty well worn question."

Miyuki answered with her back still turned.

"...I'm sorry."

"No, I'm not blaming you or anything."

Shaking her head, Miyuki's smile was carefree.

"Very well... since you have a friend who really is trying her hardest."

"I... also think of you as my friend."

"I know. Which is why you're so conflicted right? You're doing your best not to hurt either of us."

At Miyuki's gentle gaze, Shizuku abashedly looked away.

"As I was saying... Onii-sama and I are true siblings. Or at least that's what it says on the records, and DNA tests have always confirmed that relation."

"But..."

"I know what you want to say."

As Shizuku stammered, Miyuki nodded understandingly.

"These feelings I have for Onii-sama, even I know it transcends the realm of normal sibling bonds."

Shizuku fell silent in embarrassment.

"You know... in truth, I died three years ago."

"Huh?"

In light of this confession, not even she could suppress her voice.

"Or maybe it's better to say I should have died? But at that time, I truly could feel my life fading from my body, so I suppose 'I really did die' isn't that inaccurate either."

As Miyuki spoke her smile was so fleeting, and the line 'I really did die' delivered with such conviction that Shizuku couldn't help but feel a shiver run down her spine.

"It's because of Onii-sama that I can stand before you like this. Being able to cry, to laugh, to speak with you right here and now, is all thanks to him. I owe my life to him, and all I have and all I am belong to him alone."

"That's..."

The question 'what does that mean?' remained unspoken, and no answer to it came.

"The feelings I have for Onii-sama are not romantic love."

The answer she gave instead referred to the second question 'as a man?', and the conviction in her voice was no less than before.

"Romantic love, means you want something from that person doesn't it?"

Even if she could have conversely asked Miyuki 'isn't love wanting that person to be yours?', Shizuku didn't reply. She believed it wasn't suitable, and besides,

"But, there is nothing I want from Onii-sama. Because I have already received me myself from him."

She instinctively understood Miyuki wasn't searching for an answer.

"I don't desire anything more from him. I won't even ask him to accept my feelings. In the end... I guess, love[2] is the only word I could use to describe it."

"...I got it."

At Miyuki's confession, Shizuku could do nothing but raise the white flag.

"Miyuki, you really are the real deal."

"I think it's a somewhat warped way of looking at things myself."

As Shizuku just shook her head, Miyuki closed one eye and gave a mischievous smile.

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Soon after Shizuku and Miyuki left, Honoka went to check herself in a mirror. When she left the room, she said she was 'going to pick flowers'.

While she looked herself over, she ran through the words Shizuku had said. 'I'll take Miyuki outside, so you invite Tatsuya in the meanwhile'.

She had immediately known what she meant. Shizuku understood Honoka's feelings perfectly well without needing to consult her. Truthfully speaking, the capsizing incident earlier had also been something 'orchestrated' by Shizuku in an attempt to bring Honoka and Tatsuya together. She had informed him earlier that Honoka was not a good swimmer, and her plan had been that Tatsuya would save her then Honoka could use that as a pretext to approach and thank him. In case Tatsuya didn't make it in time, she also had a followup plan prepared. What had eventuated was a complete accident, but as a result Honoka had been able to monopolize Tatsuya for the day, so even as Shizuku felt guilty she was also rather happy.

Now, Shizuku had set the stage for Honoka's confession. Apprehensively, Honoka applied a light covering of pale rouge. Touching up her hair and rechecking her attire, Honoka muttered 'alright!' as she psyched herself up. According to plan she was to lure

Tatsuya away while Miyuki wasn't here, and Honoka proceeded back in to the living room.

She wasn't even aware that her feet were trembling slightly.

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Walking next to Tatsuya and stealing a glance at his face every now and then, Honoka was troubled as to when she should start talking.

So far everything was going as envisioned. When she had asked him 'would you come outside with me for a bit?' he had immediately replied yes, which puzzled her somewhat.

In a way, the far too smooth start had shaken her slightly. Tatsuya was silent.

Out from the villa they had turned right, and as if to shelter Honoka from the waves Tatsuya had walked on the sea side throughout.

Somehow, it felt to Honoka as if he had already guessed her intentions and was avoiding reaching the conclusion.

A growing sense of crisis welled up within her that if she didn't act herself, nothing would be resolved.

"Tatsuya-san."

After opening and closing her mouth countless times Honoka finally managed to let out a strained voice, and Tatsuya stopped and turned around.

By now the lights of the villa were out of view.

Other words which were even now being exchanged that same night were lost to the sound of surf and never reached them.

Under the endless starlit sky, accompanied only by the murmur of the waves, Honoka stood looking at Tatsuya face to face.

However, she couldn't proceed. Even as he encouraged her with his eyes, Honoka could only glance aside and start chattering.

"I..."

At times she would look up, meeting his gaze as if trying to say something, then with a strained expression stammer something out; this process was repeated numerous times.

"Yes, what is it?"

Tatsuya encouraged her in a softer tone than usual, with softer words than usual.

Perhaps encouraged more by his voice than his words,

"I... uhm, I... I like you!"

These words that Honoka finally managed to squeeze out, after all her hesitation, may have even managed to penetrate through to the other side of the darkness.

But Honoka didn't think about that at all.

Right now, to her, the two of them were the only ones in the whole world.

"—So how does Tatsuya-san feel about me?"

Unable to look him in the eyes Honoka squeezed her eyes tightly shut, yet an answer didn't come.

"...Did I cause you trouble?"

Gingerly opening her eyes Honoka asked in a tearful voice, but Tatsuya simply shook his head with a smile.

"Not at all. I had a feeling you might say something like this. Though I only realized around afternoon today."

As they looked at each other, Honoka felt she could sense a deep indescribable sadness in his eyes.

Preparing herself for the sorrow that was sure to come, Honoka squeezed her hands tightly. But Tatsuya's response, for better or for worse, was something unexpected entirely.

"...You know, Honoka, I'm actually a human missing part of his soul."

"...eh?"

"When I was a child, I was involved in a magic accident of sorts... some of my mental functions were erased."

Honoka's face paled visibly. Her pallor was evident even in the dark night.

Her eyes were open wide, and only a 'no way...' leaked out as she covered her mouth with her hands.

"At that time, I guess, I lost all of what you could call feelings of love. They weren't sealed, so they can't be released. They weren't broken, so they can't be fixed. That which is lost, cannot be recovered."

Tatsuya spoke casually as if it were someone else's affair.

"I can't feel love. I can like someone, but I could never fall in love with them. In a way, only the knowledge remains. Searching my mind, I can tell a part is missing."

As Honoka covered her mouth, she didn't utter anything like 'that's a lie' or 'I don't believe it'. She was literally shocked speechless. Only Tatsuya's profession rang though her mind.

"This may be an underhanded way of speaking, but, I do like you. However, that's only as a friend. No matter how hard you try, I will never be able to think of you as a special woman. That will definitely be something painful for you — something that will hurt you."

Saying so, a powerless smile drifted across his face.

"Which is why I cannot answer your feelings."

Tatsuya fell silent.

Honoka likewise.

Only the sound of breaking waves filled the dark night.

As the tide gradually crept up the shore,

and at length, finally reached their feet,

Honoka raised her head.

"Please don't be mad... you know, I had thought, Tatsuya-san liked Miyuki. Not as a sister, but as a woman."

"...That'd be a misunderstanding."

"Yes, it seems so. Tatsuya-san is smart, so... if you were lying, you'd definitely be able to come up with something more credible. I've never heard of a magic capable of erasing partial features of the mind, yet even so, I believe you. Still, that being said, it also means you'll never be able to love any other girl right?"

Somewhat puzzled at this unexpected turn of events, Tatsuya answered 'well, yeah...' with a nod.

"...If so, then it's fine."

"?"

"From now on always, Tatsuya-san will never have a lover right? If so, for me to like you, wouldn't turn into an illicit love right?"

"That's... true, I suppose."

"Then there's no problem. From now on as well, I'll continue to like you! Um, until I can like someone else that is!"

Her declaration was bright.

"...I don't mind."

Tatsuya nodded with a wry smile.



He wasn't so dull as to not understand why Honoka had purposely added 'until she likes someone else'.

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The sun aggressively asserted itself the next day as well.

The temperature was in excess of 30°C from the morning.

In that sweaty weather, upon the sandy beach—

A fierce scorching battle was being waged.

"Onii-sama, my back. Won't you help me with this sunscreen?"

"Tatsuya-san, want some juice?"

Or,

"Shizuku is lending us her jetski. Want a ride?"

"Apparently there's a nice dive spot just over there, want to go?"

And so on, while the others around felt the oppressively heated atmosphere.

"Miyuki, you really were holding back yesterday, huh..."

"Honoka-san, it seems a great weight has been lifted from you, huh..."

As Erika and Mizuki looked on in amazement,

"..."

Shizuku's face was troubled,

"Well, it seems he really has it tough."

Leo's face was filled with compassion,

"...Yoshida-kun, what's the matter?"

"Eh, no, it's nothing."

and Mikihiko was — no, well, for the sake of his honour it'd be best not to say.

Anyway as their friends each had their own separate thoughts as they gazed their way, Tatsuya alternated between Miyuki and Honoka's requests, sighing at every turn.

When jet skiing, he rode tandem with Miyuki in the passenger seat (afterwards was Honoka).

Truth be told, Honoka was actually a fairly competent swimmer — yesterday she had panicked for a different reason — as he went with her via motorboat to the dive spot (Miyuki also came along).

After applying sunscreen (or rather reapplying), he had food pushed into his mouth one after the other, like a goose being fed for foie gras ('ahhn's accompanied and all).

Being caught in this pressure hotter than the Ogasawara air mass (love pressure?), Tatsuya who was being constantly buffeted around in this burning atmosphere...

More than yesterday, more than ever, looked forward to being able to relax again.

# *The honour student's supplementary lesson*

Entering into the second half of summer vacation, First High’s campus became rather deserted.

With the Nine Schools Competition – a major event of the summer season – drawing to a close, the various athletic clubs fell into a state of self-guided practice. Another week into the future, all the clubs would once again be bustling with activity in order to welcome the new semester, but currently even club activities fell prey to summer vacation.

Yet, the place was not completely deserted as a small minority of students still came to engage in individual practice. This was especially the case for Year 1 students, who found it difficult to use the training facilities when certain upperclassmen were present and could now take full advantage of this opportunity to fully employ the facilities.

In the sealed practice field for mock battles, the figures of many a Year 1 student could be seen.

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Someone was running amidst the irregularly erected large, square pillars.

With vision so severely limited like this in a room, this was practically a maze even if there were no walls. The intermittent flashes of light as well as the abandoned terrain littered about one’s feet aroused the terror that one might stumble at any moment.

Nevertheless, deceleration was out of the question even under these conditions. This was a timed exercise that was in progress. Even if this was individual practice, leaving behind a terrible blemish was unacceptable.

The forest of pillars split into a fork in the road.

The choice was made in a flash – take the right path. There was an automatic turret set just ahead.

As if on reflex, the right hand holding the CAD aimed the “muzzle” and pulled the trigger.

The preset Mass-Type Magic for competitive use was triggered.

The gravity sensory devices flipped a switch and the automatic turret ceased moving.

Cold sweat dripped down his back a little after the fact, but there was no time to ponder this. In order to salvage the time lost when his footsteps came to a halt on reflex, he had to pick up the speed to complete the exercise. Thus, he passed to the side of the motionless automatic turret and corrected his trajectory by following the curve formed by the pillars on the left.

At that instant –

--His flank suffered a vicious impact.

--The alarm signaling his disqualification rang out.

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Along the racetrack that was illuminated once more, Morisaki grimaced as he glanced down at his body. A red paint pellet was tightly stuck to the right side of the practice uniform worn by the Battler Shooting Club.

The pellet could be directly peeled off by hand since it had already dried off, but in order to properly clean the uniform he needed to use the removal fluid stored in the preparation room. Morisaki swiftly headed for the exit in order to avoid obstructing the next user.

The sound of him brutally shoving the door open caused the female student performing maintenance on the shooting device used for Guided Shooting to widen her eyes and turn around. (Guided Shooting utilized bullets fired with magic rather than employing gunpowder or compressed air. This was a magic competition that fired small bullets that had a diameter of 2.54 cm (1 in). The shooting device used specifically for Guided Shooting was shaped like a rifle and the stock of the rifle was altered so that there were four channels fixed in place so bullets could be inserted from four different locations and a CAD was mounted within.)

"……Morisaki, you're rude."

This female student – Takigawa Kazumi from Year 1 Class C, stopped working on the shooting device and turned a caring voice towards Morisaki.

"Takigawa…… You're a member from the Guided Shot (Guided Shooting Club). What are you doing here?"

"Woah, you actually responded like that."

Just as Takigawa said, Morisaki's response was "like that" and certainly rubbed others in the wrong way.

"I came to look for a few components for the internal CAD and I have received permission from your club leader. That's why I think there's no reason for you to ask something like "What are you doing here"?"

"Hmph…… And this can't be done in storage?"

"So sorry about that. I'm going to say this first, sharing excess components has always been a tradition among the shooting clubs. Morisaki had no idea because you always use your own CAD."

Setting aside members of the Student Council or Public Moral Committee who have been granted the right to carry CADs on campus, "normal club members" had to configure the reserve CADs provided to the various clubs and equipped with restrictions in the Local Positioning System for personal use. Upon entering high

school, Morisaki had immediately joined the Public Moral Committee and had always used his own CAD even during club activities, so there was no chance he could have learned about the club's processes and procedures for CAD maintenance.

This rejoinder was normally proof against any rebuttal, but Morisaki only snorted and turned his back on Takigawa. Wholly ignoring her words about "rubbing the wrong way", he removed the spray can from the cabinet by the wall and sprayed it over his flank. The paint pellet stuck to his side fell off and landed on the ground in one piece. Several similarly red contours lay scattered across the floor.

"Morisaki…… How many times has it been now? Aren't you pushing yourself too much? You should probably call it a day now."

"……Are you worried about me?"

"Of course I'm worried about you."

Morisaki rubbed away at the sweat that endlessly dripped from his forehead and spoke with a mocking tone. Takigawa nodded in earnest in reply.

"I want to make this perfectly clear. This is not because I'm interested in you, crushing on you, or some sort of malicious joke. I just can't stand by and say nothing as someone I know collapses in front of me."

"—I'm aware of that."

Heedless of her words, Morisaki left those words as he turned to leave. Takigawa pressed on.

"In that case, you should stop here today. Continuing to practice will only pointlessly waste your strength, nor can you derive any personal satisfaction out of it."

Takigawa directly took in the ugly glare Morisaki sent her way without averting her eyes.

"—I got it."

The one who looked away first was Morisaki.

He ceased to speak and vanished into the men’s changing room.

“I can relate to that sort of anxiety, but…… No, I probably can’t understand. After all, “he” and Morisaki are both boys.”

Takigawa watched his back disappear and murmured to herself.

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Morisaki took off the club uniform and changed into a shirt and the school pants. Just as he was about to put on the school uniform for the summer, his eye fell across the embroidered insignia on the pocket that lay over the left bosom.

--Four months ago, he took pride in that insignia.

--Yet recently, he was usually confounded by a frustration that found no release.

This unexplainable frustration continued to erode Morisaki’s heart. Nay, perhaps it was more appropriate to describe this as “a truth he did not wish to explain”.

Morisaki forsook wearing the coat and draped it over one shoulder as he walked out of the changing room.

He squinted his eyes and raised his gaze towards the blazing sun that illuminated the earth.

Even without Takigawa reminding him, Morisaki could feel the anxiety building in him.

Still, without her putting it so plainly, Morisaki might still be wasting his time on fruitless self-practice even now. That was something Morisaki comprehended.

Next time they met, he should buy her a popsicle, Morisaki thought.

His injury from the Nine Schools Competition was deemed as having to take over a month to heal, though thanks to the advent of magical healing, he was the picture of good health. Nevertheless, his body had grown rusty after staying in the hospital for a week and he hadn't fully recovered to his original level. At least, that was how Morisaki felt about himself.

Also……

--Forget being boosted by the experience on the grandest stage, his magic skills seemed to have regressed compared to his state before summer vacation—

This doubt lurked in the recesses of his heart.

Morisaki was aware that this was not a healthy state of mind, but he was unable to beat down his frustration.

(After all, there's no teacher present……)

Course 1 students possessed the "privilege" of being individually instructed by the instructors, but this was of course out of the question with no instructor on campus. This went beyond Morisaki, as even the participants of the Nine Schools Competition wouldn't typically receive instruction during summer vacation and would have to make an appointment for some time after next week.

If all he wanted was to learn theory then a simple visit to the library would suffice, but at the moment Morisaki was contemplating how to improve his technical skills. He was not decadent enough to ask for practical experience, but at the very least he wished to improve his magical abilities. That was the thought that dominated Morisaki's mind.

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When speaking of the Morisaki Family, the first thing that came to mind was the "Quick Draw" technique.

Among the Hundred Families, the Morisaki Family was a side family that did not possess a “number”. Though their magic power was rated as pedestrian, when it came to practicality under specialized conditions, they received high praise thanks to their unique talents. Even when compared to the “Numbered Families”, their talents matched if not exceeded them outright.

So, what sort of technique was “Quick Draw”?

In reality, this title did not contain any hidden meaning. “Quick Draw” was simply “quick activation”. This technique was designed with one thing in mind – how to activate magic as quickly as possible when employing CADs. Specifically speaking, this was a technique that jumpstarted CAD activity and activation before the CAD had even been raised in hopes of using magic to subdue the opponent before they could release their magic.

Strength was a secondary priority.

Degree of difficulty was not within the realm of consideration.

Even if the strength of the magic was lowered, so long as the attack could be launched first then a successful incapacitation of the enemy could be achieved.

After CADs became available at large, the speed of magic activation also increased. This technique was developed with this consideration in mind to utterly maximize speed and its element lay in the development and modification of CAD operation to raise efficiency.

In pursuit of speed, the focal point naturally drifted towards Specialized CAD and not Generalized CADs. Specialized CADs in the form of handguns were currently mainstream, so the first developed technique was the motion of swiftly drawing the handgun-shaped CAD and firing.

Hence the English name “Quick Draw”.

This initial development brought about an unforeseen side effect.

From not holding a CAD, which is to say being “completely unarmed”, to striking down the ambusher by activating magic before they could. This technique was highly compatible with Japanese operatives who usually carried concealed arms.

American special agents might intentionally brandish a weapon to threaten the attacker, but Japanese agents were asked to conceal their weapons so as to reduce the anxiety level of their principals or related personnel.

Owing to the unique nature of this ability, the Morisaki Family frequently accepted bodyguard requests. Their primary clients were civilian corporations that could not always call upon the police or military for personal protection. Although their primary objective remained researching modern magic, the Morisaki Family was better known in society for their side job running a protection agency.

Morisaki Shun was the only son of the Morisaki Family’s main branch (there were no other young men in his generation) and had started working in the agency two years ago. As a youth, people were not as wary of him. Rather than serving as a primary accompanying agent, he utilized this to his full advantage and served in a support role and observed the surroundings from the rear while preventing attacks.

When the agency was short on manpower, he was always called upon to assist regardless of whether he had the time (even though this was a side job), but recently he had not been asked to undertake any missions. Currently, Morisaki wasn’t interested in conducting practices that had no physical sense of accomplishment as he was more desirous of real (combat) experiences that validated his existence. However, he was not dispatched on a mission today either.

After removing his uniform jacket and tossing it aside, Morisaki caught the eyes of the frustrated young man watching him from the mirror.

The face belonged to him and no one else.

Takigawa’s warning reverberated in his ears.

Morisaki was aware that his current mental status was decidedly in poor condition.

He needed to switch gears while the warning from other people still dwelt in his mind – he told himself while forcibly suppressing his frantic mood before changing from his uniform into casual wear.

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Even if this was a spur of the moment outing in the afternoon, he could immediately find four or five companions if he opened his communication device right now.

Yet, Morisaki chose to walk the streets by himself.

He kept a small CAD hidden in the front pocket on the inside of his vest and kept the smaller, scattered belongings in a backpack slung over one shoulder before hitching a ride on the bus to downtown.

His destination was chosen entirely on whim. He did not come here for some specific purpose nor was this Morisaki’s preferred stomping grounds. Strictly speaking, he probably just wanted to will away the hours in a location that wasn’t too noisy but fairly lively at the same time.

With so many parks in the area, this location belonged to more than just youngsters. Still, during daylight hours on a day that wasn’t a holiday, the most conspicuous figures were young men and women of high school age enjoying their summer vacation. Most of them wore clothing appropriate for the summer season with an emphasis on cooling off.

This was rather refreshing for Morisaki.

Even during summer vacation, most students were dressed in accordance with school rules on campus.

Male students wore large sleeved tunics and female students wore leggings beneath their dresses. As a rule, both men and women wore jackets on top. Their athletic uniforms had long sleeves and pants while female students wore swimsuits used for competitions that covered everything below the neck.

However, cuteness in the form of backless clothing or revealed shoulders was on full display here. Wearing sandals with bare feet was perfectly natural just as miniskirts or shorts that covered the bare minimum areas were nothing out of the ordinary.

Morisaki himself was wearing easy-going gear that included a short-sleeved tunic embroidered with flower patterns and the top two buttons unbuttoned.

However, he was wearing a vest that opened in front that concealed a CAD.

This was the singularly most out of place area.

The youth coming and going were not carrying CADs. From the onset, Morisaki never witnessed any young man wearing dark jackets or vests nor did he see any young ladies carrying thick bracelets.

Just now, he hadn’t seen a single Magician.

It seemed like Morisaki was only able to truly comprehend the cold truth just now that Magicians belonged to a decisive minority.

Furthermore, he suddenly felt that “his throat had gone dry”.

(……This must be because I was sweating a lot in the morning……)

He rationalized this as thirst.

Not far from where he was standing stood the terrace of a café.

Without further contemplation, Morisaki walked towards the aesthetically pleasing café as if in stark resistance to acknowledging his thoughts and doubts.

The rather limited capacity of the café had no empty spaces left.

Lacking further options, Morisaki could only take a seat on the terrace that only provided an umbrella's shade from the sun. Outdoor air conditioning services were not a rarity, but this café was not equipped with one. Given the outer appearance in the style of a small log cabin and the white wood furniture, the café owner was possibly a fan of natural décor.

A certain group of people might conceive the café's style as "fashionable". Though there was indeed a demand of such in the market, this was wholly dependent on the time of year. As proof of this, the terrace of the café was sparsely populated.

Morisaki claimed a corner seat for himself as he held a cup of iced coffee and observed the youth on the streets in a lackadaisical manner.

He felt that most of them were young men and women about his age.

At least half of them were couples whereas over 90% of the other half were moving as a group. Less than 5% of the crowd were loners like him (though based on mood, he was more of a solitary soldier than a true loner).

An ostracized feeling gradually overcame Morisaki as he continued to observe the human beings around him when suddenly the silhouette of a young girl entered his eyes.

Just like him, she was by her lonesome self. No, the rarity of this was exponentially higher given that she was female.

She wore a sleeveless tunic with a high collar and a pleated skirt that fell to her knees while her bare feet were covered with sandals, a rather neutral wardrobe that was neither coquettish nor mundane.

Still, her features defied the term "mundane".

Eight out of ten people, and this number would spike to nine if they were men, would rate her as a "beautiful young lady" or "beautiful woman".

If released from the ponytail that trailed down the front side along her left shoulder, her hair would have fallen to waist length. Her large eyes that were slightly uplifted along the corners flitted about without any effort, giving the impression of a large feline on the prowl. In this case, she was a leopard rather than a tiger or lion.

Her face bespoke of an Eastern ancestry but her complexion was that of a Caucasian. Rather than labeling her a leopard, perhaps a snow leopard would be more precise (except that in reality, the snow leopard's fur was closer to gray than true white).

She looked to be two or three years older than Morisaki.

Though her features were certainly eye catching, there were quite a few young ladies present whose appearances were more beauteous when it came down to "eye catching". Morisaki noticed her because of her appearance, but stared at her for an altogether different reason.

(She…… must be a Magician, right?)

She was not wearing the commonly seen bracelet-shaped CAD.

Seeing the bag she carried with her, there was the possibility that she was carrying a handgun-shaped CAD, but there was no way to verify short of popping open his machine.

Her appearance gave no indication that she was a Magician, but Morisaki instinctively labeled this girl as someone connected to the magical world.

She remained oblivious of Morisaki's gaze, or at least feigned so, as she walked in front of the café where Morisaki was sitting.

Morisaki pursued her figure with his eyes and noticed that there were others also watching her.

And not with flirtatious intent.

Helping out the family business – an "instinct" gained from his role as support personnel raised the alarm.

She was being pursued by gazes with "malice" lurking behind them.

Morisaki paid the bill using the terminal on the table and stepped away from his seat as if nothing was out of sorts.

Morisaki was not shadowing this girl due to careful contemplation on his part. Morisaki's experiences were not profound enough to constitute a "workaholic", but this description was the closest approximation. Truth be told, the fact that she was a beautiful (young) woman certainly had an impact on Morisaki's choice.

This young lady (though she was probably more mature than that appellation) seemed to be on some sort of business as she departed the park area and walked towards the manufacturing streets.

Maintaining a prudent distance as he trailed behind her, Morisaki noticed that there were few pedestrians passing by. Although this direction ran counter to the park or other amusement facilities, the rate at which the pedestrians were disappearing could not be explained as mere coincidence.

Morisaki recognized that this was unnatural – as if some "unnatural" force was at work.

Morisaki was unfamiliar with Ancient Magic, but he believed that Taoism or onmyoshi arts should be able to use some sort of technique to affect the subconscious, causing people to avoid a specific location.

In other words, this was the work of Magicians. Ever since Morisaki noticed this young girl, she never showed signs of casting magic. Thus, Morisaki judged that there was someone other than her wielding magic to ward away outsiders.

Then, what was the motive behind avoiding other people?

Obviously, this wasn't a confusion engineered to avoid embarrassment. There was no way that would be the reason.

Possibilities included kidnaping, robbery, or – sexual assault.

In Morisaki's opinion, assassination in broad daylight was out of the question, but at any rate they were up to no good.

The next question was how many people the other side possessed. Based on the broad scale of the magic involved, there couldn't just be one or two people behind this. Without a clear picture on the opposing manpower, direct confrontation was a choice for fools. As such, the only option was to wait for the opponents to act then catch them by surprise from the flank, temporarily immobilizing the "enemy" and seizing that opportunity to evacuate the girl from the scene.

--Morisaki decided on this course of action.

However, the speed at which the situation spiraled out of control surpassed Morisaki's calculations.

Morisaki had believed that these miscreants – at least whom he deemed were miscreants – would wait until the young woman reached the deserted factory area before making their move.

Even if there were only a few people around, the streets were still under observation from the cameras. Hence Morisaki was certain the events would not play out according to the miscreants' wishes once the young girl reached the (second generation) Rainbow Bridge.

Nevertheless, during the instance that the road was devoid of vehicles and pedestrians, the eyes that followed the young girl transformed into figures that surrounded the girl.

"Who…… Who are you guys!?"

The young girl screamed at the silently approaching men.

Her reaction was rather defiant. Under these circumstances, it wouldn't be strange for even a male to be stricken with fear and unable to speak freely.

Still, based on the fact that the young woman failed to detect that there was no one else around her, she too must have fallen prey to the miscreants' magic.

Morisaki verified that the young woman was not panicking – her state of panic would necessitate a change in plans – and raised his CAD

from behind the trees that dotted the sidewalk. Sniping from concealment was not one of the Morisaki Family's stronger suites, but from an objective perspective, given Morisaki's traditional responsibilities as a support member in the protective agency, he should be more adept at "Flanking" than "Quick Draw".

There were a total of 6 suspects.

He needed to take them all out in one strike to safeguard the young woman.

Cold sweat slid down Morisaki's temple.

At some point, his breathing became shallow and hurried. Forcibly adjusting his breathing pattern, Morisaki charged out from behind the trees.

As he charged towards the young woman, he squeezed the trigger twice.

He dove forward when he saw his targets reach inside their jackets and squeezed the trigger once more in mid-air.

In lieu of the nature surrounding the "bodyguard" profession (even a side business still counted as a profession), the Morisaki Family developed a type of a magic that could bring down a target with one blow without inflicting serious damage.

He caused the targets to accelerate to the rear then immediately accelerated them forward to nullify the force. By rapidly looping this Move-Type Magic that incorporated two processes, he shook the internal organs of five of the targets – with an emphasis on the brain, causing them to collapse one by one.

By the time Morisaki took aim at the sixth target, his heart leaped violently.

Directly in front of his eyes was a silencer – the gun's muzzle.

That was no CAD.

It was a real gun – an automatic pistol.

Morisaki had accounted for the possibility of a magical counterattack, but never expected that someone would possess a firearm.

Given their use of magic to clear the area, he had assumed that his targets would lash out with magic.

He had erected magical countermeasures ahead of time, but was not prepared to defend against bullets.

There was no time to use magic to block the bullets or shift his own body.

Morisaki redoubled the efforts in his legs and sought to escape the line of fire.

Nonetheless, by the time he gave the order for his muscles to move, the unique cough that accompanied any firearm equipped with a silencer rang out.

The muzzle was not aimed at Morisaki.

The young girl had grabbed ahold of the hand holding the gun from the side.

Morisaki pulled the CAD's trigger.

When the sixth person collapsed to the ground, the young girl seemed to be dragged downwards as she fell to a seat on the road.

"Can you stand?"

Morisaki ran to the young girl and reached out for her hand without waiting for a response.

"We best leave here soon. At any rate, let's head for the bus station. These guys don't seem like they want to cause a scene."

The young girl was indeed made of sterner stuff. Despite suffering an ambush, there was no sign of tears or hysterics. After nodding in reply to Morisaki's words, she grasped his hand and scrambled to her feet.

"This way."

“Thank you.”

Hand in hand, Morisaki led the young girl on a run towards the train station.

Wearing sandals with heels normally prevented running at will, but rather than being pulled along by Morisaki, the young girl was neck to neck with him (Morisaki had obviously lowered his velocity as well).

She never let go of his hand.

The soft touch of that petite hand spurred the (nominally) chivalrous spirit in Morisaki’s heart.

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After reaching the bus station, Morisaki proposed that they quit Ariake, but the young girl shook her head.

“I have an appointment with someone else here.”

“Sending an e-mail message would……”

“Owing to a few pressing reasons, I am unable to directly contact the other person.”

The young girl raised her eyes and wore a slightly perplexed smile.

This bewitching smile caused Morisaki to lose the tenuous control he had over his internal turmoil.

“I am very grateful that you saved me.”

The young lady turned a blind eye to his furious blush.

Morisaki was appreciative of this caring side of hers that was altogether different from his peers.

The obligation that men held towards beautiful females – or something of that nature – burned even brighter in Morisaki’s heart.



Which is why he found it doubly hard to accept the young woman's next words that ran counter to his expectations.

"However, I think this is far enough. Some other time…… Some other day I would like to find a way to repay the favor. If it's convenient, could you give me your contact information?"

At this point, the young girl revealed a "dismayed" expression. Figuring something was amiss, Morisaki's entire body tightened, but upon discovering the bashful smile on the young woman's face, a different sort of anxiety pervaded his frame.

"Ah, my apologies. My name is Lin Richardson. I'm attending college in California and traveling at the moment. Please call me Lin."

"I am Morisaki Shun."

Morisaki was intensely thankful that his voice wasn't amplified when he delivered his name, though it wasn't like he knew who these thanks should be extended to.

"You don't have to pay me back. After all, you bailed me out when I was in danger earlier. That aside……"

Morisaki drew upon duty as his motivation and sought to switch gears from his agitated mood (that being said, claiming that this duty arose from a more romantic motivation would be the most genteel way of putting it). When the enemy possessed the numerical advantage, loitering near the scene of the ambush was not a wise decision. Normally, they should not be leisurely conversing like so.

"I do not believe that this incident will end like this. Do you have any inkling as to the cause behind this attack?"

Seeing as the optimal decision of "fleeing" was off the table, Morisaki was trying to gather more information to devise a plan of action. For example, factors such as the identity of the enemies, how long until reinforcements arrive, etc. Protection of privacy was also

one of the mandatory duties of a bodyguard, but this was subservient to necessity if that information was vital to the principal's protection.

"I'm terribly sorry. I cannot reveal that."

Furthermore, being unable to obtain all the necessary information was not a legitimate reason for failing to complete a protective assignment.

"Is that so……? I understand. I will not pry into Lin-san's personal business. In turn, may I serve as Lin-san's protection until the arrival of the person who was responsible for meeting you?"

Morisaki's request caused Lin to widen her eyes.

"……Why?"

"This country has a saying: years of toil for a single moment."

"I have heard of it."

Lin's tone sounded displeased.

"I see, my apologies……"

Morisaki awkwardly apologized, but that did not imply that he was backing down.

"I chanced upon the scene where Lin-san was almost abducted. This must be a fate of some sorts."

In truth, Morisaki himself did not know why he was so stubborn on this matter. Lin had made her stance very clear. Even if she had not blatantly rejected him, she was hoping that Morisaki ceased to associate with her – that she didn't want to put him at risk was obvious enough. In spite of this, Morisaki was not of a mind to beat a retreat here.

In short, the term "abduction" was based solely from Morisaki's point of view. There was a possibility that Lin was a young lady of wealth who had gone truant and that these men were dispatched by her parents to bring her home. Assuming this was actually an

“abduction”, then this may be related to a major crime and the earlier group of people may belong to an opposing organization. Alternately, they may have been sent to recapture a former member who fled the organization. Regardless, anyone who dared to directly fire their weapon without warning in broad daylight could not possibly be an upstanding citizen. This was the conclusion that Morisaki arrived at – or perhaps unilaterally decided this was so.

“……You should have realized just now that this will be very dangerous, correct? You don’t seem like a person who cannot differentiate between reality and games.”

Lin’s somewhat befuddled eyes did little to dampen Morisaki’s ardor. The other side consisted of scoundrels who were preying on a fragile, defenseless woman. In that case, it was clear which side Morisaki should support – at least this was what his heart told him.

“Lin-san is in far more danger than I am. I would not be lying or exaggerating to say that this country’s law enforcement is quite capable, but the crime rate is not zero. This is especially true for magical police officers handling magic crimes, where the reaction speed is practically lethargic.”

“The same could be said for every country.”

Lin wore an impish grin as she tried to deflect the statement, but Morisaki was not fooled.

“That’s why I believe that Lin-san needs a retinue.”

“……And you are volunteering?”

With a completely serious expression on his face, Morisaki nodded in agreement to her leading question.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover. I have two years of experience as an attache.”

“……Aren’t you a high school student?”

“I am a Year 1 student at the Magic University-affiliated high school. However, the family business manages a protection agency.”

“Oh..... Your name is Morisaki, so you must be from the Morisaki Family then?”

Lin only halfheartedly lent an ear to Morisaki up until this point before finally nodding in the affirmative. At the same time, this also implied that Lin belonged in a social stratum that was well versed with a retinue.

“But I don’t have any money on me.”

“I’m not here to talk about a job. I just don’t want to pretend not to see anything.”

“How gentlemanly of you.”

Lin laughed lightly, causing Morisaki to avert his eyes in embarrassment.

“—I understand. Since you’re so worried, then I place myself in your care.”

“—Please leave it to me.”

Altering her earlier expression, Lin fixated her eyes on Morisaki, to which he responded with a nod as if bestowed a great honor.

“Then there’s no time like the present, is it OK if I made a request right this moment?”

“What is your request?”

Bodyguards were not butlers, but in order to effectively fulfill their protective duties, establishing rapport with their principal was highly important. So long as the demand was not too ridiculous and did not affect the guard’s mission, then compliance with the principal was a must. This was one of the basic rules for bodyguards in both the east and the west – though “East Side” might be a little different. Morisaki had no idea what this request could entail so he was slightly nervous

as he waited for her to continue. Lin smiled in a charming fashion before dropping this line:

“Please call me Lin. The next time you call me “Lin-san” will be grounds for immediate dismissal.”

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“……So Lin isn’t a Magician?”

“Yes, though I don’t know how Shun came to that misunderstanding……”

Lin smiled in confusion. In comparison to Morisaki who was struggling to lower his guard and still spoke in a stiff tone, Lin freely referred to Morisaki as “Shun” and embraced him as a friend.

Was this the poise that came with maturity?

Morisaki pondered this as he peeked at Lin’s face.

He felt that Lin was a beautiful young woman.

Normally, a person’s appearance would be beautified when observed from a distance, but in her case, seeing her from up close was just the same and may be even more bewitching. This might be due to her rich array of expressions that never appeared twice – that was the conclusion Morisaki drew from his limited life experiences.

“Ah, maybe it’s because of this?”

Lin said this as she pulled a necklace out from before her chest.

With the top button left undone, soft cleavage danced in and out of sight. Morisaki’s heart raced at this scene just as blood suffused his face, but Lin appeared to be entirely unaware.

“What is that?”

“It’s a magic talisman.”

“Ah?”

“A magic talisman. Wearing this reduces attention from other people. This was made during the age when abductions ran rampant for a variety of reasons and was crafted as a protective charm to ward against being targeted by evildoers…… It’s a bona fide artifact.”

Modern magic was created from the research and systemization of Ancient Magic. In that context, Morisaki was aware that among the objects referred to as magic talismans, there was many an “artifact” that could actually release a magical effect.

On the other hand, it was also true that fakes which were nothing more than decorations had flooded the market in numbers that were dozens of times greater than the true artifacts. Given that Morisaki was a young Magician who focused solely on modern magic, it should be no surprise that he bore a suspicious impression of objects like “magic talismans”.

Yet right now, Morisaki was not questioning Lin’s words.

Her smile seemed to dispel the skeptical thoughts being raised in Morisaki’s mind.

The question that floated into Morisaki’s brain was another one altogether.

“You’re not a Magician but you carry a magic talisman?”

When Morisaki asked this question with a perfectly straight face, Lin suddenly wore a flustered expression.

“Oh…… Well, this was something a friend gave me to “ward away stalkers”.”

“Stalkers..... So you ran into something like this in the past?”

“Uh…… Well, kind of.”

“Then were those guys earlier……? No, I said I wouldn’t pry. Sorry.”

Seeing Morisaki abidingly refrain from questioning her any further, Lin secretly heaved a sigh of relief.

“……Still, this doesn’t seem to work against those guys any longer.”

Morisaki’s attention was already turning to the attackers from earlier.

His diligent personality saved Lin just now.

“……Nor is it effective against Shun. Are Magicians just special?”

This question was angled in a different direction than the dialogue Morisaki was constructing.

If asked in the days of old, he would probably have puffed his chest and answered with a nod in the affirmative.

He believed he was special. His status as a Magician was a source of great pride, just as he was confident that even among his peers he was a particularly talented Magician. Although the results of the Nine Schools Competition ran counter to his hopes, he was of the belief that had the other team not treacherously broken the rules, he should have been able to achieve results befitting his own confidence without relying on that strategist who only had wily tricks up his sleeve for assistance.

However, for some reason, the current Morisaki was unable to affirm Lin’s words.

“……I don’t think there’s a great difference, since magic is a human ability after all. Lin’s magic talisman is an object that allows people to use magic powers. In that context, there’s nothing different than a Magician’s arts.”

“Hm…… That makes sense when you put it that way. Magicians are human beings just like us.”

Lin was unaware that her words formed an opinion that separated “Magicians” and “non-Magicians” into two racial groups.

Fortunately, Morisaki missed that nuance.

Morisaki was adamant about avoiding areas with few people, so the two of them ultimately spent their time in the restaurant in front of the bus station until the person Lin was waiting for made contact. The one who initiated the conversation was always Lin with Morisaki largely only agreeing with her, but neither felt the time was ill spent.

Just as Morisaki expected, they never caught sight of any suspicious individuals afterward. Yet, occasional opportunities allowed him to feel various auras watching them from a distance in all directions.

At this point, Lin's expression suddenly tightened in anxiety as she pulled out her information terminal before Morisaki's questioning eyes. Apparently, her point of contact had sent her an e-mail.

However, how should he explain why Lin tensed instead of relaxing when the person they were waiting for made contact? Morisaki was quite bewildered by this.

Could it be that the person they were waiting for was one of Lin's "enemies"? Morisaki hoped that Lin was at least able to explain that to him – or perhaps come clean.

"Directly beneath the Rainbow Bridge."

Lin spoke with a tight expression on her face.

"A boat will be dispatched to pick me up."

"……Let's go."

Directly beneath the Rainbow Bridge that the other individual spoke of probably referred to the square next to the bridge's foundations. On a normal weekday, that was a location inundated with visitors. Morisaki urged Lin to stand and reached out his hand towards the terminal set on the table's surface.

However, Lin beat him to the punch by a hair and placed her card on top of the terminal first.

"Plainly a high school student yet you dare to pick up the tab for an older woman. Far. Too. Brazen."

Using her index finger, Lin punctuated each word with a poke on Morisaki's forehead, eliciting a furious blush on his part.

Lin's originally tensed face was now exchanged with a composed smile.

Taking the main road would be faster, but Morisaki purposefully chose the winding paths leading through the park. He believed that the magic used earlier to ward away pedestrians and vehicles would have a much harder time in the park where most people stood still compared to the constantly moving flow of people on the streets.

He was not cognizant that this lengthened the time he spent with Lin.

At the very least, his surface thoughts did not venture into this territory.

Morisaki also requested that she place her necklace into her purse. Under the current conditions, spells that diverted other people's attention would only achieve the opposite effect.

Logically speaking, this was the right idea. However – this unfortunately brought them to unexpected trouble.

Currently, a human wall was erected in front of Morsaki and Lin.

The human wall was thick enough that it could even block the free kick from a professional soccer player.

Alas, in terms of wardrobe, appearance, and all assorted factors, these individuals were a far cry from the refreshing air found on athletes. To put it bluntly, they looked more like hoodlums.

Though there might be a few minute differences here and there, the majority of them wore similar garb. Most of their naked torsos were only covered by leather vests whereas metal rings covered above and below their wrists and elbows.

Their vests reminded people of a lizard's scales and their surface texture reflected the metallic scales that were popular three years ago among the "small crowds". Compared to the usual bulletproof and

anti-piercing fibers, this composite material boasted gigantic leaps in improvement in both protection and shock resistance. However, since the air permeability was terrible, forget wearing this outdoors in summer, even wearing this in a heated indoor environment during winter would cause someone to sweat like a horse, thereby deeming this product a failure. The overwhelming majority of the young men in front of them kept the front unzipped, though even the sleeveless vests looked to be quite warm indeed. Given that this completely defeats the purpose of blocking frontal stabs or shots, the only conclusion that could be drawn was that this was a fashion statement from the past that was stylish but impractical.

The metal rings around their wrists utilized EMS – muscle amplifiers that stimulated the muscles through electric currents. Training devices that utilized EMS were an early form of technology that existed back in the 1960s, but in the modern age, other electric currents have been introduced to successfully raise the speed for muscle contraction. These rings were normally used for medicinal purposes during rehabilitation, but could also be used to easily improve punching power, making it a popular choice among disreputable street fighters.

Several of the young men wore AR goggles over both eyes. The metallic straps attached to the goggles were covered with sensory devices which appeared to be equipped with light capture processes. These processes normally emitted a directional signal once objects approached within a predetermined distance but were not something that could be wielded at will by casual users. In short, this was also probably a fashion statement.

This martial (?) style that emphasized physical appearance was the telltale feature of the delinquent gang who styled themselves “Fight Club”. Standing in front of the two people who came to a halt, the group of young men never stopped leering at them.

Not a word was uttered.

Morisaki slipped an arm around Lin’s shoulder and sought to retrace their footsteps.

Several people let out wolf whistles.

The human wall moved with an astonishing level of organization and surrounded the two of them in a veritable human fence.

“—We are in a hurry, please let us pass.”

“Ah hah, please don’t say that. How about playing with us?”

“Yeah, yeah, compared to that little man, we know what the really fun things are.”

Lin sought to peacefully defuse the situation, but the young men only tightened the noose while making disgusting sounds that were displeasing to the ear.

“We’re really in a hurry—“

“It’s no use, these guys never planned to listen our words in the first place.”

Morisaki stopped Lin’s continued attempt at persuasion.

“Ho ho, telling it like a big man.”

“Though it’s true that we’re not here to talk.”

Crude laughter drifted in from their surroundings.

“Little man, let’s cut to the chase.”

“Leave the job of guiding her to us, you’re free to go. Now scram!”

A young man who must be the leader of this gang changed his tone from friendly to threatening from the rear of the crowd – which happened to be right in front of these two. He was a head taller than Morisaki and the T-shirt he wore was missing sleeves that appeared to be ripped off, revealing a pair of biceps with thick muscles rising and falling. His arm was covered from hand to shoulder with silver geometric shapes which served the same purpose as the muscle amplifiers in boosting muscle contraction speed (though the results were questionable). A swarthy waist and sturdy thighs clearly denoted a physique that did not belong on someone with a passing fancy.

In response to the look that did not stretch the term ugly, Morisaki wore a light smirk on his face.

“What’s so funny……?”

“Nothing, pardon my manners.”

The young man’s low tone grew evening more threatening. However, Morisaki still wore a mocking expression as his choice of words grew scathing.

“I could understand if this was Shibuya or Ikebukuro, but I never imaged I could run into endangered species like yourselves in Ariake.”

“……What a fascinating guy.”

“You should be satisfied with blowing one round of hot air, no? We’re actually pressed for time, so could you let us pass?”

“……Looks like you need to learn a lesson in pain.”

The young man shifted his weight to the tips of his toes. Seeing this, Morsaki slightly shifted his right shoulder backwards.

The vest that opened forward moved slightly.

“Takashi-ni, this guy is a Magician!”

The movement must have revealed the handle of the CAD being held in the hidden holster. A young man to Morisaki’s right side shouted out a warning.

The circle surrounding the two of them backed off a bit. With one notable exception, they had grown fearful.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of!”

The sole exception – the “Takashi” who served as the leader exhorted his comrades onward.

“I know as well, Magician.”

The corners of his mouth twisted as he looked down upon Morisaki in a theatrical manner. This didn't seem like bravado, so perhaps he warranted a tiny hint of praise.

"Your guys' magic is on the same level as guns, right? You would be arrested and imprisoned if you use magic on an unarmed person, right?"

Morisaki silently looked upon the young man.

The young man continued onward with a gusto.

"A Magician who cannot use magic is nothing more than a wooden doll. What did you think that sort of empty hot air was going to do? Ah ha ha ha!"

The youth let out a foolish bray of laughter to which Morisaki returned a merciless smile up at him.

"You who face extinction, dare you put that to the test?"

"……What did you say?"

"I said, do you want to test whether we Magicians are nothing more than wooden dolls without our magic, you pretentious scoundrel."

"Ha…… Hey, none of you interfere."

The leader of the endangered species who styled themselves the "Fight Club" turned his face back from a jigsaw mess to his normal expression (as ugly as it was). He raised his fists before spreading his legs to lower his center of gravity, hereby adopting a fighting stance.

Seeing this, Morisaki also wiped away the derisive smirk on his face and allowed his backpack to slide off one shoulder. He raised both fists in front of his face and lightly starting hopping in place.

"Wooden doll, let's dance."

"I accept, superficial scum. However, you touch her at your own peril. I will make you all regret being born into this world."

"You're just a little man, but that mouth of yours…… Has spunk!"

That sentence served as a declaration of hostilities.

Like a whip, an upward kick was sent hurtling towards Morisaki's face.

In order to protect Lin right behind him, Morisaki could not evade to the back.

Instead, he lowered his head to duck beneath the swirling kick.

"Takashi" adroitly pulled back the upward kick and sent the leg pummeling downwards to Morisaki's head.

Rather than calling this a hook kick, this was more like an ax kick.

Morisaki rose in the direction of his kick and narrowly avoided the blow.

The other man's face changed.

The moment the leg touched the ground, he immediately let fly a lightning fast punch.

Morisaki deflected it with one hand.

Forward kick, mid punch, low kick, mid kick, sweeping kick, revolving elbow…… A swift combination of attacks showed that this young man was not just shooting his mouth and his moves were not just cheap imitations. Based on these movements, he had probably undergone the entire training regime for karate under special tutelage.

Yet, all of his blows were being entirely dodged or neutralized by Morisaki.

Frustration was starting to mount on "Takashi's" face.

He sought to decide the fight in one blow and telegraphed a long range hook punch towards Morisaki's chin.

Morisaki was not going to let this opening pass by.

Stepping forward, he directed a left jab towards "Takashi's" face.

No, the force behind the punch was a direct punch rather than a jab.

If his fists have not been thoroughly trained, the force of the punch might readily damage his own hand, but Morisaki never wavered and sent a well-trained right palm strike inside the enemy's guard.

"Takashi" wavered and fell rear first onto the ground.

He was utterly astounded at being taken to the floor in two blows by someone who was an entire head shorter than he was.

Morisaki sent a mocking smile at the older man looking up at him with "disbelief" written all over his face.

"Damn, that was slow. That sort of speed might get you through a street brawl, but you don't have a chance against us combat Magicians."

The other young man probably could not grasp the meaning behind Morisaki's declaration.

The young man was unable to accept a reality where a Magician who relied entirely on a cheating ability like "magic" somehow possessed greater physical prowess than someone like him who had undergone rigorous training.

In systematic magic, there were the Four Great Systems and Eight Major Types, one of which was Acceleration-Type Magic.

This sort of magic was not just used to accelerate or decelerate an object, but could also be used on the caster.

A Magician who cast personal acceleration magic would normally become accustomed to operating at the upper speed limits of what the senses can handle. This was a speed that could not be comprehended by people without magic.

In truth, the speed that professional racers experienced on the race track was a velocity that they frequently encountered at school, on the practice field outside of school, during competitions, and in combat.

Blows that professional fights would deem "fast" were practically slow motion in their consciousness.

Morisaki picked up his backpack and grasped Lin’s hand.

He had no inclination to continue dealing with the “endangered species” who refused to accept reality.

Furthermore, even though they hadn’t wasted too much time, there was no denying that this was the longer route.

Nonetheless – Lin quickly thrusted away Morisaki’s hand.

Before Morisaki’s shocked gaze stood Lin as she seemed to stare in surprise at her own actions.

The mind ground to a halt as their limbs seemed to be frozen in time.

Seeing Morisaki freeze, the young men reached out their hands towards Lin instead of taking action against him.

Grab ahold of her hand, pull her entire body over, and then press a knife against her face – that was probably their plan of action. Yet, this desperation ploy was rendered obsolete before they even reached the phase of pulling Lin over to them.

Behavior patterns that had been deeply engrained into his subconscious overcame his brain’s rigidity and spurred Morisaki’s body into action on reflex.

In a smooth motion like flowing water, Morisaki drew the CAD from his bosom.

By the time the “muzzle” was aimed correctly, the standby phase for the CAD had already been disabled.

The time Morisaki spent hesitating over using magic could be measured in milliseconds.

The young men were all struck in the head and keeled over on the ground.

Some of them fell on soft parts of the body and started to bleed, but Morisaki’s “reflex” never stopped.

By the time Morisaki recovered his wits, the only people standing at the scene were her and himself.

And one other person.

The young man who had his seat glued to the ground was spared being knocked unconscious.

Morisaki turned an emotionless eye, one that had not reawakened his feelings, on the young man.

“Y…… You damnable monster! Don’t come over here! Don’t come over here!”

The youth remained prone on the round and reached a hand into one of his pockets before plucking something out and throwing it.

Seeing that the opened switch knife harmlessly flew off into an inconsequential direction, Morisaki once more reached out a hand to Lin.

This time – Lin grasped his hand.

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And so, the two of them silently ran hand-in-hand all the way to the appointed place where the boat should be waiting.

There were no further obstacles along the way. As befitting the waterside square in a park, many couples were about. Many spared a glance at the two people that had a carried a different air about them before turning their eyes away as it was none of their business.

Lin stood on the small pier where the ferries docked and looked out towards the sea. The hands that connected the two of them naturally parted here.

“……Shun.”

After a lengthy silence, Lin softly called out to Morisaki.

“What is it, Lin?”

Lin kept her eyes on the sea and did not turn her head.

“Do Magicians…… have a thirst for battle?”

Lin did not look at Morisaki’s face and made sure that he could see her face as she asked this question.

“Lin?”

“Do Magicians…… have a thirst for battle? Do they like hurting others? Do they hunger for danger? Do they desire to display abilities that normal people do not possess?”

Lin’s volume was slightly elevated, giving Morisaki the impression she was reprimanding him.

“……Are you upset?”

“I’m not upset! I’m furious!”

In short, she’s upset, right? This thought ran across Morisaki’s mind, but he wasn’t calm enough to actually retort.

When Lin turned to face him, her eyes were brimming with tears.

“……It is not because Magicians thirst for battle. At the very least, I dislike hurting others.”

Lin’s expression and the tears threatening to burst from her eyes put enormous pressure on Morisaki.

“Then why did you aggravate him?”

“Because that wasn’t someone you can talk down!”

Yet, Morisaki had his own reasons. He did not believe he made the wrong decision. Perhaps there was an even better solution, but Morisaki believed that he had also handled the situation fairly well.

“In that case, we can still flee! There was no need to defeat everyone, all we had to do was use magic to escape! We also had the option of

calling for help. I don’t think that fighting was the only option we had.”

“That……”

Morisaki was unable to say anything because he knew Lin’s words made sense.

But –

“Maybe we could have ran away at the time. However, those guys might have called in more companions. Also, there is no way of knowing if the earlier crowd was going to show up either. There was no need to take on unnecessary risk, so if the opportunity presented itself to crush the enemy then it should be taken.”

--Even so, he was not going to back down.

“Why is fighting the only thing you think about! Why is it that everyone who isn’t with us is against us!?”

“Magicians are not superheroes! It’s not like in the TV dramas, where there’s a logical solution for everything!”

This principle, along with the fundamentals of the bodyguard business, was drilled into Morisaki by the uncle that was closest to him in age.

Magicians are not superheroes.

Magicians did not possess the power to do whatever they pleased.

Thus, do not hesitate when pulling the trigger.

Calmly differentiate between enemy and ally.

The techniques of the Morisaki Family and Morisaki Shun the person, neither was strong enough that they were still able to safeguard their target of protection after an enemy had launched their attack.

“—I am unable to show mercy to my enemies. I’m not incredible.”

“Shun……”

When Lin saw Morisaki gritting his teeth with a pained expression his face, the tumultuous emotion in her eyes faded.

With a warm expression on her face, she reached out and took hold of Morisaki's hand.

"Lin……"

Morisaki allowed Lin to grasp his hand, but didn't match her gaze as he murmured to himself.

"Do you also think…… that Magicians are monsters? Do you believe that Magicians are monsters that wield powers beyond human limits? That Magicians are able to grant any wish like Deus ex machina?"

"Shun……"

"Magicians…… are also human beings."

"Shun…… are you afraid of fighting?"

"……I'm terrified. Regardless of whether its guns, blades, fists, magic…… I'm scared of them all."

"Then why do you fight? You are obviously a high school student, why do you take on a dangerous job like being a bodyguard?"

"That's because…… I possess a power that I was born to carry……"

"Shun, I don't think that you have to do dangerous things simply because you're a Magician or because you possess magic. Since you're terrified, then why don't you just stop……? Magicians are human beings too, right?"

Morisaki's face was clearly faltering.

Terror and hope were stirred together among the maze of confusion.

With a protective smile, Lin continued to watch over Morisaki.

Amid all the couples at this location, their actions were not particularly conspicuous.

Still, based on what was about to ensue, the two of them were overly focused on the conversation.

Lin was the one who noticed that something was awry.

“Shun…… Isn’t this strange?”

“Lin?”

“I get the feeling that no one has been looking at us for a while……”

If this phrase had originated from one of Morisaki’s peers, he would have explained it as being “overly self-aware”. Yet, these words coming from someone as beautiful as Lin carried an entirely different context.

“Lin, you aren’t using that necklace, are you?”

“Ah? Yeah…… That’s why it’s so strange. I’m plainly not using that, but I feel just like as if I’m using it……”

“Lin, sorry.”

“Ah!”

Morisaki suddenly clasped Lin to his chest.

At the same time, he swiftly surveyed their surroundings.

Even after performing such an outrageous (in his eyes) motion, no one paid them the slightest heed.

No one even glanced at them.

Morisaki let go of Lin and began hunting for the hint of magic.

Although there was no way to be sure, there was definitely a vague aura enveloping them.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“Quiet!”

Morisaki dropped his backpack and pulled out a thick bracelet from within before wearing it on his left wrist.

Then, he removed an empty holster and hung that from the pocket around the right side of his waist.

Completely abandoning the “low-key” approach, he was preparing for battle.

As if on cue, men dressed in pitch black and wearing dark sunglasses materialized all around them and half surrounded Morisaki and Lin. This was practically straight out of the urban legends surrounding the MIB.

Morisaki gritted his teeth.

He should have known ahead of time that the enemy would use mental interference magic.

(……The time for regret is later!)

Morisaki told himself in encouragement.

One of the men in black stepped in front of the two of them.

The gaze hidden behind those dark shades was not directed at Lin, but at Morisaki instead.

“……We are from the Intelligence Control Agency.”

The man pulled out a black card holder with those words.

He opened it to show Morisaki.

There was indeed the mark of the Department of the Interior’s Intelligence Control Agency inside, as proven by the special print that changed color and shape depending on the light’s refraction. Morisaki was aware that the changing shape carried a hypnotic effect so he immediately averted his gaze after verifying its authenticity.

The corners of the man’s mouth twitched upwards as he stored the document in his breast pocket.

“We will take responsibility for protecting Miss Richardson. What happens beyond here is official business, so please leave immediately.”

Morisaki was on the verge of nodding in reply when he realized Lin behind him had a white-knuckled grip on his vest.

“Lin, are you going with them?”

Lin furiously shook her head in response to Morisaki’s inquiry.

Morisaki turned his eyes forward and gazed into the eyes of the man in black – or more like his sunglasses.

“Permit me to refuse.”

His conveyance left little room for misinterpretation.

“I’ve already said this was official business……”

“This is a mission of protection, isn't it? In that case, you have no right to override the decision of the person in question and enforce your own will on the matter. Or do you all have a warrant? Not that “Internal Affairs” has the right to make arrests, of course.”

The man in black revealed a smile that said “you’ve forced my hand” and turned to look to his side.

That was the signal.

Gun muzzles appeared from the men’s sleeves.

Throwing his left arm around Lin’s waist, Morisaki used his right hand to operate the bracelet and jumped for the water’s surface.

Lin gave out a shriek.

The sounds of compressed air being fired and short needles shredding through the air were covered by her cries.

The darts from the tranquilizer rifles passed above the two figures who had leaped to one side.

Morisaki activated Move-Type Magic while in mid-air.

They stopped falling as they approached sea level and bounded to the next pier.

At the same time that he moved Lin to a kneeling position, Morisaki also dropped his own stance and set his bracelet to standby mode.

In the next instant, he had pulled out the handgun-shaped CAD from his breast.

He had confirmed 8 enemies when they had been surrounded.

Of which 2 were Magicians.

The enemies' identities were extinguished from his mind.

The sole idea that occupied his thoughts was to protect the young woman behind him.

The notion of "escape" never crossed his mind.

His fear of battle had already faded.

Nor was he afraid of being watched by terrifying eyes.

He will strike down the enemy to protect others.

That was the only option in his mind.

First, Morisaki acted to disable the enemy Magicians and clicked the trigger twice.

Following that, one deep groan could be heard.

Confirming results. One down and the other warded it off.

Morisaki saw the enemy Magician operating a CAD with his fingers.

He also saw the muzzle of tranquilizer rifles pointed towards him.

With the speed of a stage magician employing his tricks, Morisaki returned the handgun-shaped CAD to the holster around his waist and disabled the standby mode on the bracelet-shaped CAD he wore.

He could feel that the enemy's Acceleration-Type Magic was beginning to have an effect on him.

However, Morisaki ignored that magic.

He was calling the Activation Sequence for Area of Effect Move-Type Magic.

Morisaki used “Stillness” Magic to catch the incoming needles fired by compressed air.

Horizontal Acceleration-Type Magic rushed towards Morisaki’s body.

His feet left the ground and fell towards the water.

Lin stretched out her upper torso and called for Morisaki.

The men in black swarmed towards her.

The “gun” popped out of the water.

Holding the CAD that bore a resemblance to a handgun in his right hand, Morisaki began to float upwards thanks to the breath he inhaled earlier and aimed at the Magician to the enemy’s rear.

Magic was activated.

The “opposing” Magician was caught off guard by Morisaki’s surprise attack and struck unconscious.

Following that, Morisaki once again changed the Specialized CAD in his hand to standby mode and activated the powers set in the Generalized CAD. He sank into the water while operating the number pad and activated Acceleration-Type Magic.

Morisaki burst through the water in a manner that would turn a dolphin green with envy, no, that even a dolphin could not hope to match.

His wrists overlapped with the right hand over the left as he aimed the Specialized CAD in this manner at the enemy while turning off the power of the Generalized CAD. Pumping his psions into the Specialized CAD, Morisaki pulled the trigger six times in the air.

Morisaki was unable to completely neutralize his descending force and had to immediately fall into a roll upon coming into contact with the cement.

As his body descended to the earth, all of the men in black collapsed as well.

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“Shun, Shun! Are you alright?”

Lin knelt next to Morisaki as he lay prone on the ground and desperately called out to him.

“I’m fine.”

Morisaki opened his eyes and nodded. Maintaining his current position, he temporarily regulated his breathing before sitting up.

“Ouch!”

However, he immediately fell to one knee when he attempted to stand.

“Shun?”

“It’s nothing…… I just twisted my ankle.”

By the time he said this, cold sweat beaded his temple.

Lin looked around them for help. The mental interference magic that blocked other people from noticing them had already been disabled. Many sightseers or couples out on a date were watching them from afar.

They were just watching them from a sizeable distance with an uncomfortable look in their eyes.

Their eyes were focused on Morisaki’s left hand.

On the bracelet-shaped CAD that signified his status as a Magician.



Lin knew that the people around them were whispering among themselves.

Not a single person approached them.

Morisaki gave up on trying to stand and sat down with legs splayed out.

“Lin, has the appointed boat arrived yet?”

“Huh? Ah…… I think it’s that one.”

“I see……”

A small vessel was drawing closer. It was a swift boat that didn’t draw much water and could be used either on the river or at sea.

“I’m sorry, it’s all because of me……”

Morisaki said “Don’t worry about it” to the drooping Lin.

“Forget about it, so long as Lin is safe and sound. I can finally relax now that I’ve kept my promise.”

This was not the sound of bravado, but of earnest satisfaction that welled forth from the heart.

“Why……?”

“Why indeed……”

Morisaki used a reply that was not a reply to answer Lin’s question that was not a question.

“Maybe it’s just as Lin said.”

Still, even if her question was incomplete, Morisaki largely understood what Lin wanted to ask.

“Our magic is a tool developed for battle…… We Magicians were assembled with this in our hearts, so it may be true that we have a thirst for battle and are only tools used for battle.”

Morisaki’s soliloquy seemed to have entirely abandoned his own sense of self and prompted tears to appear in Lin’s eyes when she heard this.

“I’m sorry, Shun, I’m so sorry……”

Lin burst into tears as she lowered her head and repeatedly choked out apologies.

“Lin? Why are you apologizing? Why are you crying……?”

Bewildered, Morisaki asked Lin the reason behind her tears and apologies, but his mind was calm and at peace to the point that even he was astounded.

“I’m sorry. I said something so terrible, I’m sorry……”

“Lin?”

Morisaki was flabbergasted.

He had no idea what to say.

Nor did he have any clue what to do.

Unfortunately, up until this moment, no one had ever taught him what to do under these circumstances.

“Don’t call yourself a tool. Shun always protected me regardless of the danger. Compared to those who only watch other people suffering without lifting a finger, Shun is much more humane.”

Morisaki managed to connect Lin’s broken words that came between her sobs –

--and his heart swelled with pride.

“I’m…… ashamed of myself. Just then, I was exactly like those people in that I also felt somewhere in my heart that Magicians were disgusting and were different creatures than myself. That’s why…… Shun…… I’m sorry……”

“Don’t worry about it too much.”

Morisaki’s words were spoken in a steady tone. More so than the literal words themselves, this served to help encourage Lin and caused her to raise her head.

“I am very satisfied that I was able to assist Lin. For me, today was a very meaningful day.”

Just as Morisaki had no idea what Lin was hiding, neither did Lin knew the inner struggles Morisaki was facing.

Before a rather perplexed Lin, Morisaki revealed a pleasant smile.

“Lin, the boat’s here.”

Morisaki’s words prompted Lin to turn her body.

Just as he said, the small vessel had docked. Two men wearing suites bowed deeply to Lin.

“Lin, please go ahead. I’ll be alright after I sit here a little longer.”

“Huh, but……”

“Go on. They might attack again later.”

“……I know. Shun, thank you very much.”

There was no kiss of goodbye.

To say that there were no expectations involved would be a lie, but not progressing in that direction may actually be for the better. This fulfilling “reality” would not be tarnished. Rather than pushing himself, this was how Morisaki truly felt.

The only regret he had was that he could only sit there and watch her leave.

Lin waved from the boat, to which Morisaki raised a hand from his sitting posture in response.

This was rather improper, but Morisaki felt that this was probably more like his style.

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“Meilin-sama, thank goodness you’re alright.”

“Yes, that’s because that young man saved me.”

On board the vessel that had left the shoreline, Lin wore a radically different and cold expression as she called out a name to one of the men who came to welcome her and nodded in agreement.

At this moment, an older gentleman with a head full of white hair appeared.

“Meilin-sama…… To visit this country alone at a time like this. Do take heed of your position.”

“Are you giving me orders?”

“No, your subordinate dares not.”

The old man bowed respectfully towards Lin.

The older gentleman’s decorum was impeccable, but his attitude was hollow.

“Nevertheless, this country’s government appears to fight with us until the end. This time they dared to insult Meilin-sama, I believe equivalent retribution is in order.”

“I forbid it.”

The old man raised his eyes and put forward this suggestion, but Lin resolutely vetoed it.

“It’s true that the Japanese government was both barbaric and rude this time. However, from that young man, I obtained a bond of friendship that is more than enough to compensate. Since you all have chosen a person without any magic like myself as your leader, then I forbid you all from taking action against this country. If you are unwilling to accept that, then I will return to California.”

“No, let everything be done in accordance with Meilin-sama’s wishes.”

Morisaki was not arrested by Internal Affairs.

They were likely also acting beyond the bounds of law. The unconscious men in black were borne away in front of Morisaki’s eyes by their comrades. The agents from Internal Affairs who came to collect their colleagues never spared Morisaki a single glance.

As to who Lin was and why she was being targeted a government organization, no one told Morisaki the truth.

Lin’s real name was “Sun Meilin”. She was the adopted daughter of “Sun Richardson”, the head of the Hong Kong international crime ring known as “No Head Dragon” – the daughter of the leader’s most beloved mistress – and the new leader chosen by the lucky survivors, but Morisaki never had the opportunity to know that.

# *Amelia in Wonderland*

On a certain cloudless day in the last third of August, 2095 CE.

Standing at the gates to the amusement park awaiting the arrival of her friends was a young girl whose red hair was ruby-like in its brightness and wearing a military style jacket with its many pockets and a miniskirt.

The girl's name was Akechi Eimi, also known as Amelia Goldie, a student of the National Magic University Affiliated First High School.

With summer vacation nearing an end, the plan was to come to this amusement park to play around with some fellow first years. As they were in different clubs, normally there were few chances for them to hang out.

(It seems I'm a bit too early…)

It was still half an hour before the appointed time. That might be expected if it was a date with the opposite gender, but there was likely no one who would come this early when going out to play with friends of the same gender. Eimi herself certainly would not normally come this early. (Incidentally, as Eimi herself had yet to experience such encounters with the opposite gender, there was little meaning behind her supposition).

As for why she had ended up here so early, an international phone call she had received this morning was to blame.

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It was the sound alerting her to an incoming call on her room's video phone that drew her out from the world of dreams.

The digital clock read five o'clock.

Thinking ‘what a nuisance,’ Eimi looked at the message window and saw that the caller was her grandmother on her mother’s side, the matron of the renowned Goldie mage family of England and effectively the ‘number two’ in authority.

Eimi snapped wide awake.

Even if that were not the case, Eimi's parents were unbelievable people who never rose from bed until a predetermined time, not even if a truck crashed into the house. Consequently, it was an unwritten rule in the Akechi household that Eimi, who did not use a Sound Sleeper device, would handle all early morning callers and visitors.

“…It has been a while, Grandmother.”

Eimi refrained from saying good morning.

“Because I am not properly dressed, please excuse my using voice-only with the call.”

“Good morning, Amelia.”

It seemed her grandmother was also aware of the time difference, Eimi thought as she heard the greeting.

As it was daylight savings time, the difference between here and England was eight hours. Over there, it was now nine o’clock. If one thought about the time here, to be honest, Eimi really wished her grandmother had waited another hour before calling.

“It may be very hot over there, but are you keeping healthy? Your body has never been very strong after all.”

If you know I’m not very tough, then I wish you would let me sleep a bit more, Eimi sincerely thought. Of course, she did not give voice to that wish.

“I’m fine, Grandmother. The heat wave for the past couple days has been subsiding.”

This was just some honeyed words so as to provide her elder with some peace of mind. In reality, last week's heatwave had been absolutely horrible, though this week it was becoming more tolerable.

Summer would soon be ending anyway.

"Is that so? Don't push yourself too hard, Amelia."

"Yes, thank you very much, Grandmother."

Even as she replied politely, Eimi's head tilted to the side. Just as she was wondering why on earth Grandmother had called-

"Actually, to avoid the heat, I will be staying at the Swiss mountain villa from next week until the fall. I would be very happy if you would also come, Amelia."

"…Me, go to Switzerland?"

The hesitation in Eimi's response marked her awareness of the invitation's undertones.

"Yes. I have wanted to have a nice, long chat with you for quite some time, Amelia."

"I as well, Grandmother. There are a great many things I would like for you to teach me, but…"

But this was impossible. In a little over a week the second term would start.

While Eimi was trying to politely decline the invitation with that explanation, her grandmother was not so easily deterred.

"If you are worried about school, there is also an excellent magic school in Switzerland. It should be fine if you studied abroad for about half a year? I could handle the arrangements with the school."

Because you've known the head of the Magic University for a long time is what you're saying, Eimi thought impatiently.

No one would be surprised that her grandmother was well acquainted with the highest levels of the magic community in Japan.

With the restrictive control of overseas magic education, the chances for a magic high school student to study abroad were for all practical purposes non-existent – at least Eimi had not heard of any such instance – but, with her grandmother, the impossible might well be achieved.

At this rate regardless of Eimi's intent, it looked like she might well find herself studying abroad.

While somehow or another halting the discussion here with her emotional appeals was a victory of sorts, after the phone call ended, rather than relief, Eimi felt uneasy.

Though she was a grandchild of a daughter married into another family, until now her grandmother had never interfered with her life. While visits tended to require Eimi to be on her best behavior even as she was treated kindly, other than that she had been left to her own devices – until now.

Now however some reason had appeared to prompt her grandmother to want to keep her close by.

However, without having any knowledge of her grandmother's reasoning, the endless worrying afflicted upon her head made going back to sleep impossible. As such, Eimi ended up leaving the house well before the meeting time.

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"Eimi!"

When she turned her head toward the call of her name, Eimi saw the girl who was today's sponsor waving.

"Sakura!"

As Eimi waved back, the girl trotted over.

The girl wearing the (thoroughly) goth loli-esque one-piece dress was Sakurakouji Akaha.

This girl’s name was read as Akaha, not Momiji.

On the day these two met as classmates,

Eimi: Akaha, how do you write that?

Akaha: Red leaf, the same as ‘autumn colors’ but pronounced Akaha, you see.

Eimi: Hee? So sakura and akaha, that's cherry blossoms and autumn colors put together. That’s a rather gorgeous name.

Akaha: But you know, it’s a shame both are rather ephemeral.

Eimi: Aha, the beauty of elegant simplicity, no?

Akaha: But you hardly seem the type to have much relation with elegant simplicity. You’re a rather colorful brilliance.

The chance to become friends came with the exchange of false laughter after their conversation, making fate rather mysterious.

“Sakura, you came with Subaru?”

“Ehehe…”

Though Eimi’s questioning had no deep meaning, Akaha began laughing nonsensically.

Eh, is it possible you actually have that kind of preference? Unbeknownst to Akaha, Eimi made a mental note regarding her.

However, as Eimi focused once more on the companion standing next to Akaha, she revised her opinion and felt that she could “understand it a little, probably.”

At a glance, there was a handsome young man wearing a summer suit. That image was only further emphasized with the sophisticated under-rim glasses.

However, in reality this youth was a androgynous female classmate.

Satomi Subaru was by way of a teammate at the Nine Schools Competition – a relatively new friend, but now, their relationship was amiable enough to allow for exchanges such as, “Subaru, you came as a deterrent against skirt-chasers?” or “Milady, it would be a pleasure to escort you.” – Moreover when in the middle of such conversations, the two would smile, no, grin without reserve.

“Is something wrong, Eimi?”

As Eimi allowed her mind to be filled with fantasies of Akaha’s inclinations, Subaru peered at her face suspiciously. Confronted with the prim and proper facial features of the handsome young man (only in appearance) staring at her up close, Eimi felt her heart racing a little but resolutely refused to let any of her thoughts surface in her behavior, replying "nothing's wrong" with a curt shake of the head.

“Is that so?”

Subaru's wide grin was galling and Eimi really felt like giving her a good stomp on the foot, but doing so might end up dragging herself into an even more embarrassing situation, so with all her will she pretended not to notice.

“That’s a relief. In that case, let’s go in.”

Objectively speaking, Eimi’s poker face was rather lacking, but having said her piece Subaru turned away. Knowing when to stop was also one of her charms. However, to be considered ‘charming’ by other girls might well be something Subaru herself would only accept reluctantly.

Without further thought on what ‘a relief’ and ‘that case’ was, so as no to waste any more time Eimi made no objections.

“Oh yeah, it’s been a while since I’ve been to an amusement park.”

When Eimi said this with a lively voice,

“Theme park.”

For some reason, Akaha interrupted her with a displeased tone.

“Eh?”

“Theme park. Wonderland isn’t an amusement park, it’s a theme park.”

As expected from the repeat customer with the most visits on hand, it seemed Akaha could not help but be more than a little finicky about this amusement, no theme park.

“Sorry, sorry, yeah, Wonderland is a theme park.”

While Eimi felt there was little difference in either label, that very same feeling meant there was no need to stir things up. Eimi was soon correcting herself to use theme park instead of amusement park. Nevertheless, the irreverent tone and manner of the two did not go unnoticed and with half-lidded eyes Akaha regarded the them with displeasure, but with Subaru and Eimi proceeding through the gate she hurriedly chased after their backs.

With that amusing mood, the two went through the gates without having to queue and lost themselves in Wonderland.

◊ ◊ ◊

Wonderland was an amusement park with magic as its theme.

Possibly because of that, all the interior fencing and attractions in the premises were arranged like a labyrinth. Furthermore, every attraction also served as some kind of trick house. It was very difficult to leave after entering, even if one did not try out all the attractions. Due to this kind of park layout, rather than "entering" the park, it would be better to say that visitors were "lost" in it.

And right now, a certain girl was really lost inside.

"Seriously! Forget about Local Positioning System navigation, but what's with GPS not working either!?"

After visiting three attractions, Eimi had somehow lost her two friends and was now grumbling at a portable terminal.

"Can't be helped, right? Isn't that one of the park's selling points?"

Subaru was the one receiving her vented frustrations.

"Even if that's the case, blocking GPS signals is going way too far!"

"Relax. Is there a map display somewhere?"

Well-versed in dealing with girls, Subaru (despite being a girl herself) took an approach of gentle appeasement. As a result, Eimi seemed to put aside her annoyed emotions somewhat.

"I've been searching since a while ago... But let alone a map display, I can't even find a guide anywhere."

"Really...? Anyway, if worse comes to worst, just light some fireworks and I'll use my magic to come pick you up."

Subaru's specialty was Leap magic along with inborn talent for Cognitive Inhibition (her usual flamboyant behavior was apparently a reaction to the skill of "imperceptibility").

Despite possessing skills in Cognitive Inhibition, she was nowhere near the level of First High's counselor, Ono Haruka, whose true identity was a Public Safety investigator. Nevertheless, it would be an effortless task for her to stroll casually in the air without attracting attention while other park visitors were focused on having fun.

On the other hand, Eimi's personal talent what was known as Artillery Magic under the Movement System, capable of accelerating massive objects to high speed within short durations. During the Nine School Competition's Pillars Break event, she had used her own ice pillars as bowling balls to launch into enemy territory, knocking down the opponent's pillars all at once, thereby displaying of her strong-arm tactics. For Eimi, it would not be a difficult task to replace heavy projectiles with compressed masses of air then firing them into the sky to produce explosion noises on the level of fireworks.

"Subaru, that's not allowed. Using magic for such reasons will get us into trouble."

However, Akaha entered the conversation on her own terminal and rejected Subaru's suggestion.

Laws had very strict conditions regulating the use of magic. Indeed, using magic for something as trivial as kids getting lost would definitely entail dealing with the police.

"...Can't be helped, Amy. Can you see the Sage's Tower?"

The Sage's Tower was Wonderland's signature attraction and the tallest structure there.

"Yes... Just barely."

Eimi turned her head and looked around, finding behind a hedge the pinnacle of the building, constructed from faux white stone.

"Then we'll meet up there."

"Okay, got it."

Ending the conversation, Eimi glared at the Sage's Tower viciously, as though it had killed her father--well, that might be an exaggeration, but at least the killer of a beloved puppy.

◊ ◊ ◊

Staring at the voice communcations unit on the portable terminal whose call-in-progress light had switched off, Subaru pondered a certain matter.

"What's the matter, Subaru?'

Naturally, this behavior made her companion suspicious. In response to Akaha's question whose tone was split evenly between curiosity and worry, Subaru smiled slightly demurely and said:

"Hmm, nothing much... I was just wondering why Amy would end up getting separated from us."

"Because she's too hyperactive?"

"Hold on, that's..."





Akaha had given a blunt answer without thinking, putting Subaru at a loss for words.

"It'd be understandable if it happened momentarily, but she didn't realize until neither of us could get a bead on each other's location. I think the situation isn't very normal."

"Hmm~ ...Does Amy have no sense of direction?"

"...Umm, Sakura, you're making me very curious how the two of you perceive each other..."

Subaru shook her head, trying to dispel the urge to sigh, then made her tone of voice serious.

"Putting that aside, Amy doesn't have a terrible sense of direction. She's in the hunting club and already acknowledged as a promising first year. Sure, that'd irrelevant if all she did was compete in indoor shooting competitions, but someone with no sense of direction can't possibly hunt birds and animals in the mountains."

Subaru's diatribe made Akaha finally realize the possibility that "Eimi was perhaps simply lost."

"Besides, Wonderland is a recreational facility that even children can visit to play. No matter how much it's made like a maze, it'd be too weird if there were no clues at all for finding friends who got separated or if people who are lost cannot even find a map or a guide."

"You have a point. Since it's one of the park's selling points, it wouldn't hurt to provide some assistance in this area."

Exchanging solemn glances, the two girls made their way to the Sage's Tower as Subaru suggested "Anyway, let's go."

◊ ◊ ◊

Unlike her friends who were weighted down by burdensome doubts while gradually making their way to the meeting point, Eimi was getting more and more frustrated by her lack of progress in approaching her destination, making her too occupied to think about anything else.

Currently, the tower's pinnacle was still visible so the direction was still clear. But whenever she tried to walk towards it, she would always encounter dead ends that forced her to find detours.

Subaru had determined that Eimi "did not have a terrible sense of direction" but that description was far too conservative.

To be more precise, her sense of direction was extremely sharp.

Eimi's sense of direction and ability to grasp the landscape made her aware that she was simply going in circles in the same area.

Having a visible target that could not be approached, knowing the current situation yet unable to find a way out, this further magnified her frustrations several fold.

And now, a thorny hedge of wild roses was blocking Eimi's path. Exasperated by the numerous dead ends she had lost count already, Eimi reached the limit of her tolerance.

Even a boy would have trouble crossing a hedge formed from thorned roses, so a girl would have no way of breaking through.

But Eimi was no ordinary girl.

(Watch me blow up this hedge...!)

Totally vexed, Eimi reached into the pocket of her miniskirt--more precisely, it was a hole in the skirt that looked like a pocket. Reaching for the leather holster strapped to her thigh, she drew out the long and slim terminal-style CAD.

Her main CAD was a shotgun model but that was not something to be carrying openly in the streets after all. Still, this backup CAD was more than enough for eliminating this obstruction. Usually operating

gun-model CADs with one hand, Eimi used both hands to invoke the activation sequence on this CAD.

"Hold on! Akechi-san, are you for real?"

However, a voice was heard from behind as though perfectly timed. Eimi was startled as though someone had splashed a bucket of ice water on her head. The magic sequence was dispelled in the middle of its construction.

Caught in the act of using magic arbitrarily.

More precisely, it was an abortive attempt, but by this stage, Eimi's intentions were obvious to any magician. Her actions were very unlikely to be overlooked. Also, the other person knew her identity, which made things even worse. Pondering these matters in a mental state of despair, Eimi felt cornered without any way out, even failing to realize that since it was someone who knew her, it might be possible to plead to him to turn a blind eye.

Eimi turned around in trepidation but the sight of the completely unexpected figure stunned her, rooting her to the spot.

The person who spoke to her was a short clown (short was relative to male norms, he was still taller than Eimi).

In circus performances, magic tricks were usually performed by clowns. Hence, using magic as the park theme, it was not surprising that Wonderland had staff dressed as clowns.

However, this clown was not wearing a typical baggy clown outfit. The right torso was black while the left torso was white. The right sleeve consisted of irregular horizontal stripes of black and white while the left sleeve had vertical narrow stripes of black and white. The pants were black on the right and white on the left. The vest was white on the right and black on the left in front while the colors were reverse on the back. A very peculiar outfit.

He was wearing a white glove on his left and a black glove on the right. Instead of a brimless clown's hat, he had a wide-brimmed top hat with vertical stripes (black and white as always).

Beneath the top hat was a face with a fake expression drawn in black and white. No, it was actually a fake face--A mask.

The right side was a crying face with black on a white background while the left side was a smiling face with white on a black background.

This eerie atmosphere, rather than a clown, was more like--

"--The Phantom?"

Eimi was reminded of a certain well-known opera character.

"Huh? Akechi-san, what are you talking about?"

The familiar voice, speaking friendly words, quickly brought Eimi back to reality.

"...Tomitsuka-kun?"

"Yes, I'm Tomitsuka-kun."

The clown took off the mask to reveal a familiar face.

Tomitsuka Hagane, Year 1 Class B of National Magic University Affiliated First High School.

Eimi's classmate.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

"This is my part-time job."

Eiri asked in surprise whereas Hagane answered while slowly putting his mask back on.

"Job? Why?"

First High did not forbid students from working part-time.

What Eimi meant by her question was: "Why are you working as Wonderland staff, a job that only ordinary students would pick?"

Not only was Tomitsuka Hagane a student at a magic high school, he was also a Course 1 student at First High.

He was ranked fifth in the year group for both practical skills and theory respectively. His overall grade made him an honors student ranking fourth in the entire year.

Due to his specialty in magic being unsuited to the type of events offered, he was not chosen to compete at the Nine Schools Competition. But in the realm of Martial Magic Arts where magic fighting was combined with unarmed combat, he was rumored to be the school's number one despite his short height and being a first-year student. Eimi had no idea what being number one at First High actually meant in the real world, but undoubtedly, he was an excellent magician (to be).

Even as a "seed" or a "sapling," those who possessed excellent magic skills would not have any trouble at all in finding short-term employment. For magicians, job openings for people with magic skills were ever present and offered better conditions than normal jobs for the most part.

Eimi could not imagine the hourly wage for a host staff in this park, but it could not possibly be higher than renumeration for magicians.

"It's family-related."

"...Oh I see."

She was satisfied with this answer.

Hundred Families--Tomitsuka.

The Tomitsuka was one of the top clans in the Hundred Families. Furthermore, among magicians in the country, they were also top-class in wealth. This probably meant that the Tomitsuka family had invested in either the company managing this park or its parent company, a large construction firm.

Asking him to work as park staff probably included handling magic-related situations.

If that was the case, Eimi had something to tell Hagane.

"Tomitsuka-kun, say, isn't this going way too far?"

"...What's going way too far?"

Eimi suddenly pointed at the hedge and grumbled angrily, causing Hagane to lean back in surprise. Although covered by a mask, his face was probably twitching slightly.

"This hedge mechanism! I don't know anything about 'recreating a wondrous space,' but isn't blocking people's way with mobile obstacles going too far? Thanks to this design, I've been stuck going in circles in the same area for a while now!"

However, Hagane's mental state was reset to a blank piece of paper after hearing Eimi's accusations.

Hagane could not understand her.

"Hold on, Akechi-san. There's no such mechanism in Wonderland."

"Huh?"

Expecting to hear some kind of excuse, Eimi's mouth gaped open in surprise after hearing Hagane's answer.

"Doesn't that go without saying? The design concept here is ultimately 'recreating something like a maze' but not actually a maze. If visitors felt frustrated, then it's a negative effect on the performance. In the end, if visitors are unable to advance, that would lower the usage rates of park facilities, reducing revenue."

"Eh... But..."

"Besides, this area is a construction zone under expansion. Park visitors are not supposed to enter in the first place. Even involved personnel almost never come in here during the daytime. How exactly did you get yourself lost into here?"

Eimi almost panicked from hearing the unexpected, but forced her hands and lips to move.

"If you ask me where... Basically there."

Eimi pointed at the hedge she had just tried to blow up.

"Huh?"

"I said, I entered from there! There wasn't a hedge there until just now!"

"...Are you serious?"

"I am very serious. Despite how I may look, I'm quite confident in my ability to grasp local geography."

Seeing Eimi's serious look, Hagane's gaze suddenly turned sharp behind his mask. Staring straight at the hedge, he made a "hmm..." sound from his throat.

A mobile hedge made of thorned wild roses. From what Hagane knew, there were no such mobile obstacle mechanisms in this kind of place. Even if he had missed the detail in briefings, this area was not supplied with electricity, hence it was impossible for mechanical objects to be moving. Just to be on the safe side, Hagane took out an information terminal to confirm testing conditions in the new facility under construction--Indeed, this area did not have any operational facilities.

"...Akechi-san, I allow you to continue what you were doing just now."

"What?"

This sudden instruction... Or rather, commanding tone, caused Eimi to react predictably.

"It's okay, blow it up... The type of hedge Wonderland uses is an improved thornless variant so that visitors won't get hurt even if they accidentally bump into them. As far as I know, there shouldn't be any hedges here."

"I see~"

Understanding what Hagane meant, Eimi restarted the magic sequence she had failed to unleash earlier.

"Then I won't hold back... Tomitsuka-kun, you're taking responsibility for this!"

Eimi's magic activated simultaneously with this blame-shifting declaration.

Movement-type magic Exploder.

This was magic that caused all objects within the effective range of the "point of impact" to diverge spherically at high speed in an equidistant manner. This magic was capable of blowing obstacles that were collections of mulitple objects, like debris or barricades, but would have no effect on a single entity like a wall or a rock.

But in this case, Eimi was treating every rose leaf as a different target and had set the effective range relatively wide, allowing Exploder to detonate in the very center of the hedge. Torn apart, the leaves dragged the vines with them, producing a large hole in the center of the hedge.

Eimi nodded with satisfaction and was just about to pass through the hole she had made when...

"Hold on."

Her classmate's voice stopped her.

"What now?"

Feeling as though he was blocking her joy in finally freeing herself from this dead end of a maze, Eimi replied in a displeased voice.

"I knew it..."

But judging from Hagane's expression, he was not aware of Eimi's ruined mood (that being said, his actual face was hidden by the mask) while he kept staring at the hedge wall with the hole in it.

"What? WHAT IS GOING ON?"

Eimi deliberately lowered her pitch slightly and raised her voice at the same time. Hagane finally seemed to notice her brewing thunderstorm of a temper tantrum and reacted by speaking relatively quickly.

"Akechi-san, take a look. This hedge is not rooted. Neither is there a frame for supporting the vines."

"Now that you mention it..."

Having been stuck in Britain a number of times (for the short term), Eimi was very familiar with this type of hedge. As a semi-climbing plant, roses could not grow tall without support and were unable to form this kind of wall over two meters tall.

"Right, Akechi-san. This wall is supported by magic!"

Hagane swiftly inserted his right arm into the hole resulting from Eimi's explosion.

Instantly, the scattered vines converged to devour Hagane' right arm.

In terms of speed, it really was better described as "devoured" rather than "covered" by the vines. The vines, all covered with thorns acting as sharp teeth, were just about to pierce the black and white sleeve, stabbing into Hagane's right arm--That was what was supposed to happen.

"How naive!"

However, what ended up torn apart was the magic driving the vines.

Releasing a shockwave radially, Hagane's right arm blew apart the rose barrier.

"...What was that?"

From Eimi's view, Hagane had simply released a psion wave.

But psions would not affect matter directly.

A wave of psions should not be capable of blowing material objects with an impact.

"Nothing much, it's purely acceleration magic. Making the psion wave permeate through contact, I blew away the immobilizing magic that's supporting the wall, then I activated Explosion."

Explosion was a spell that accelerated all objects within the point of impact's effective range to uniform speed. It was the twin of Exploder except substituting speed-type magic for movement-type magic.

In other words, during the instant when the thorned vines made contact with his arm, Hagane had used non-systematic magic to destroy the immobilizing magic supporting the wall, apparently freeing his arm by reversing the vines' momentum before their thorns pierced his clothing.

"Gram Demolition...?"

Eimi whispered in surprise and fear. Forcibly diabling spells using the pressure of a psion wave was non-systematic magic, a type of top-level anti-magic known as Gram Demolition which hardly any magicians used.

However, Hagane shook his head with an awkward expression (that said, his face covered by his mask as before).

"Well, it's regrettable... I'm unable to inject enough of a psion wave unless through bodily contact."

This prompted Eimi to recall Hagane's moniker.

His moniker was "Range Zero." Eimi had heard of this nickname before which made reference to his nonexistent range of fire. Although it teased him for not being proficient in long-distance magic, the nickname also respected his peerless reputation at point blank range. Back when Eimi first heard about this, she had been wondering why he held this other title in addition to his family's codename without any outstanding accomplishments. After witnessing the scene just now, she finally acknowledged his prowess.

A single touch from him would dispel any antimagic protecting the body, exposing it to offensive magic in an unguarded state. Besides, simply injecting a high-density psion wave into the human body was enough to disrupt biological rhythms, rendering the victim unable to stand properly.

"...Anyway, enough about my magic..."

Hagane had probably misunderstood the meaning of Eimi's reticence, turning away with an embarrassed look (but because of the mask, his expression... hold on, there's no need to repeat that anymore), whispering in a voice that was rendered even more unclear by the mask.

"We've got company. Is their target you, Akechi-san?"

It was anyone's guess whether this just happened to be pure coincidence or if they decided that the fake hedge's destruction served as the best timing, a group of men, dressed in black clothing, black hats and shades, emerged to surround the two of them.

"MIB?"

"All I know is that the park doesn't use these outfits."

Whether Eimi's exasperated remark or Hagane's casual comment, neither reflected the gradually tense atmosphere at the scene.

Or perhaps they were trying to unsettle the MIB's intimidating aura.

But if that was the case, their attempt ended in failure.

The men in black closed in, surrounding them even tighter.

Hagane's airs of playful bantering were gone.

For some reason, Eimi returned the CAD in her hand to inside her skirt.

Getting a strange feeling, Hagane placed his hand on his face. Instead of taking it off, he was pressing the mask against his face.

Eimi instantly understood why he did that. Under pressure, the mask would fit tigher with the shape of the face, improving visibility by presenting larger eyeholes to the eyes.

"May I ask what business do you have here?"

Hagane asked politely, presumably in consideration of his status as park staff and the possibility tha he had mistaken their relationship.

However, he had no expectations for a response.

The iron-clad rule in horror movies to incite fear was to refrain from speaking.

It applied to real life as well.

Arriving all at once, hiding their true identities, sealing off escape routes, applying silent pressure, then negotiating when the target had been worn down mentally and physically. The men in black had faithfully followed this set of procedures up to sealing off escape routes.

"Miss Goldie."

But contrary to Hagane's prediction, one of the men in black spoke up politely.

Instead of using "Ms.", he was using the old-fashioned title of "Miss."

"We have no intention of harming you."

Although the man was speaking in English, not only Eimi but Hagane was also proficient in English conversation.

"All we wish is for you to hand over something to us. Naturally, we are not making demands without compensation. In exchange, we will provide something that you will need the most from now on."

"I am afraid that the meaning of your message is lost upon me."

When speaking in English as "Amelia," Eimi was far more elaborate than when she spoke Japanese as "Eimi." Perhaps because of that, her dignified airs made her sound almost like a different person. Despite

being born in a side branch, she was still part of the prestigious Goldie family, hence such airs were perhaps quite suited to her stature.

"Pardon my poor manners. Then I shall be more blunt."

THe man remained polite but the men in black surrounding Eimi and Hagane closed in even more, exerting pressure on the two of them.

"Miss Goldie, please teach us the spell of the magic projectile, Tathlum. What we will provide in exchange is assistance in stopping future assassins who intend to harm you."

Hagane originally thought that what the men in black wanted was profiting through kidnapping, at most.

However, the magnitude of the matter in conversation was far greater than expected, making him miss the chance to speak up or make a move.

Eimi responded to the man in black with a stiff tone of voice, but did not tremble.

"That magic is the Goldie family's secret technique, only taught to those recognized as members of the main family. Seeing as I am living as a Japanese far away from the main family, do you truly believe that someone like me would have learned Tathlum?"

Indeed, the Goldie family, standing as one of the main authorities on Modern Magic in England, was originally one that passed down Ancient Magic through the generations. Tathlum was the trump card spell they had acquired during the ascent of Modern Magic, involving the rewriting of Ancient Magic into Modern Magic. But no other information was known apart from the fact that it used physical projectiles.

At least, Hagane--the Tomitsuka family--had not been able to find any further details.

"Rather than believe, we already know."

However, judging from how the man in black responded to Eimi, Hagane surmised that his classmate had already learned Tathlum. As soon as he reached that conclusion, Hagane could hardly suppress the burgeoning curiosity surging in his body.

"Through certain channels, we have become privy to the knowledge that Mrs. Goldie has already taught you the spell of Tathlum."

Meanwhile, Eimi reached an almost complete understanding of the background behind the series of events.

Her grandmother had taught that magic to her; that was the truth, but it was something that only people within the Goldie family were supposed to know. Eimi had never used Tathlum anywhere outside of the Goldie home but even if outsiders were to see her practicing the magic, they would not be able to identify it as Tathlum.

The reason why Tathlum was called a secret technique was due to its activation sequence. Ordinarily speaking, magicians could only recognize magic through their effects or potential effects. Simply judging from the result of rewriting phenomena, it was impossible to distinguish Tathlum from common movement-type magic.

But this person knew that she had already learned Tathlum, in other words...

(An internal conflict within the family... No wonder grandmother suddenly made that kind of suggestion...)

Not recent events but the matter of "early this morning." As the center of all this, Eimi could not help but feel an urge to laugh at how rapidly things were developing.

"Miss Goldie, what are your thoughts? We have received indisputable information that there will be people posing as a threat near you. Pray forgive me for being forward, but your parents are only ordinary magicians. Their power alone is probably insufficient to guarantee your safety."

(So if I refuse, you guys will become the people "posing as a threat near me.")

Eimi sighed lightly.

"Why do you wish to obtain that magic spell?"

Eimi felt quite sorry for getting Hagane involved, for he was just a classmate.

"However, I know the answer already."

These people were not going to back down quietly no matter what.

"That spell is legitmate proof of being part of the Goldie family."

In that case, she had to give up on resolving this through peaceful measures.

"Even if someone was born in the main family, but was unable to use that spell, they would not be recognized as a member of the main family."

Eimi reached this realization.

"Naturally, they would be deprived of the right to inheritance as well."

As soon as Eimi asserted that, murderous intent could instantly be felt coming from the men in black surrounding them.

"That sort of thing is so easy to understand."

Eimi switched back to Japanese and taunted, meanwhile preparing for battle.

"You decline to cooperate? --What a shame."

The man in black also switched back to Japanese for the latter half of his response.

"Capture Miss Goldie. Light injuries are fine. Dispose of the kid."

At the man's orders, silver light flashed from all of sleeves of the men in black.

Slender daggers, the type used for throwing, appeared in the hands of the men in black.

There was no way they were adhering to Wonderland style, but they had hidden spring-loaded knife cases in their sleeves.

Daggers served two purposes: for melee combat and throwing. These daggers in their hands were weighted towards the tip as throwing weapons. Close-range encirclement combined with throwing daggers all at once was an effective tactic against magicians.

Nevertheless, before the daggers could be thrown, the encirclement was already broken.

"Dispose of me? Oh please, don't just decide something so dangerous all on your own."

Before the men in black could throw their daggers, the monochrome clown had already charged at the mob surrounding them.

The clown had not approached with speed faster than the naked eye could register.

Instead, he had simply run up to his opponenent normally. Although he was fast, anyone could match his speed with a bit of training. While the leader of the men in black was conversing with Eimi, the clown had already started taking action.

He had simply evaded attracting attention, like a ghost hidden in shadows.

The monochrome masked Hagane pressed his palm lightly against the man in black's chest.

It only looked like a gentle touch.

But the man he touched ended up flying backwards ten meters before hitting the concrete ground.

The two-toned colors of black and white swirled nimbly.

The interplay of light and shadow and the dramatic changes in brightness contributed to blurring outlines.

Hagane's karate chop struck the shoulder of the man in black beside him.

An ominous crack was heard.

Rather than a heavy chop with the hand, it was merely a light tap--Just a gentle touch.

Even so, Hagane's barehanded chop still shattered the humerus of the man in black's knife-wielding arm.

"Magic Arts!?"

The leader of the men in black yelled out in shock.

"Magic Arts" was the short form for Martial Magic Arts.

Martial Magic Arts consisted of unarmed combat techniques combined with magic.

Using points of contact as the points for magic activation, it eliminated the step of inputting location coordinates as variables. This type of "contact magic" was one of the fundamental skills of Martial Magic Arts.

Probably reacting to their leader's voice, the men in black surrounded Hagane and lowered their stances.

Seeing the men in black became more cautious--more serious--Hagane smiled fearlessly.

"Dear customers, this zone here is not open to the public."

Pretentiously, Hagane held his right hand to his chest while raising his left arm to horizontal and stepping his right foot behind his left foot.

"I'm very sorry but I must ask all of you to leave."

Simply going through the motions of a bow.

"Or perhaps, shall I lead the way for you all? --To the police station."

Hagane taunted the men in black using a respectful tone of voice.

The men in black behind him slowly closed in to attack him. One man attacked, creating an opening in the encirclement. This was precisely what Hagane wanted.

Taking action to accommodate the man in black, Hagane turned around and rushed at the attacking man.

The man in black was no amateur either.

Holding the throwing dagger, he stabbed at Hagane.

Instead of targeting the head that could dodge easily, the strike was aimed at the center of the torso--the bottom of the sternum.

However, the fluttering of dazzling monochrome colors caused the man in black to lose his aim. Stepping lightly, Hagane dodged the man's mistimed stab and landed a punch on his lower jaw.

This was not real magic but stage magic, using optical illusions of conjuring tricks to produce dizziness.

This was an experienced magical dance using the entire body, not something that could be learned in short time.

Hagane's strange attire was not only an outfit worn as part of the theme park's staff but also a battle outfit with practical combat considerations.

Including the leader, the men in black all had their attention focused on Hagane.

This was Eimi's rare chance.

Eimi reached into the pockets all over her military-style jacket.

What she took out was not a terminal-style CAD.

Lifted in front of her playing cards opened in a fan shape in each hand.

Holding these cards, Eimi casually swung her hands to the side.

Released from her hands, the cards flew through the air.

Some of the cards advanced straight forward while others turned and traced out curves.

Flying faster than the eye could see, the cards pierced the clothing of the men in black, stabbing into their bodies.

Blood splattered.

No one suffered a fatal wound, but no one was lightly injured either.

"Satisfied now?"

Eimi directed her question in Japanese to the leader of the men in black.

Confronting the nonstop bleeding without flinching, it was like she had simply knocked over tomato juice or something.

"This is the Tathlum you wanted. But just by watching, the spell probably can't be identified."

"No way... Tathlum is supposed to use small spherical shells instead..."

The man probably failed to realize he was using English to answer Japanese.

Intense pain did not allow for awareness of such a minor faux pas.

Rather, given that he was the only one remaining standing, one should commend him as worthy of being the leader.

Nevertheless, Eimi was not impressed with this. Neither did she care.

"...So you didn't even know something of that level? Looks like I said too much."

Eimi's eyeballs kept turning left and right, reflecting the fact that she was pondering how to pull the wool over people's eyes. Most likely,

she was regretting inside for "telling" them she had used the magic projectile, Tathlum. She had misjudged after getting carried away when she realized her enemy knew about Tathlum's existence.

Whether due to resignation or acceptance, Eimi immediately switched from a troubled look to a strong and cheerful expression.

"Uh~ You're wrong. The choice of projectile for Tathlum depends on the user's own style. The one who used shells, I remember that was my late great-uncle who passed away last year? Speaking of which, I think he had a grandson who's two years my senior? I've never met this distant cousin, but he's probably your employer, right?"

With one hand akimbo, Eimi waved her other hand at face height while making a gun gesture, chattering nonstop with a tone of "How's that for a brilliant deduction?" Eimi evidently wanted to dominate the scene with her presence, but unfortunately, the man did not seem intimadated.

Ultimately, he did not respond at all.

"Excuse me... Akechi-san?"

While Eimi was waiting for the man in black to respond, Hagane spoke to her in a slightly cautious tone of voice.

"Hmm?"

"That guy already fainted."

"Huh?"

Despite being unfazed by blood, Eimi frantically ran towards the man in black.

"Hold on, answer my question first before you faint!"

"Don't ask for the impossible."

Eimi had rushed right before the stationary man, looking like she wanted to give him a good slap. Thinking he had to stop her if she really acted out (because further attacks could lead to death), Hagane

hurried over and remarked with exasperation and relief after seeing her hold back.

"Oh... T-Tomitsuka-kun?"

Seeing Hagane next to her with a face full of exasperation--but due to wearing a mask (the rest omitted)--Eimi suddenly settled down and looked up at him in an awkward manner, grasping for the right words.

Eimi was acting almost like a different person from a minute ago. Even though this thought crossed Hagane's mind, he felt inexplicably afraid of ignoring her, so he decided to answer.

"Yes, Akechi-san, what's the matter?"

"Umm... Sorry for getting you involved!"

"Oh, so it's that."

Eimi swiftly bowed her head and apologized, eliciting a reaction of disappointment from Hagane.

"Even as just a part-timer, I am part of Wonderland's patrolling security. I can't pretend I never saw a potential kidnapping happening inside the park, even if I abstain from interfering. Besides, it's clearly our fault that so many suspicious people were able to slip into the premises, so don't worry about it."

Eimi instantly brightened up after hearing Hagane's answer.

Seeing her so opportunistic, Hagane could not help but smile wryly.

Feeling the tension gone, Hagane casually said something inconsequential.

"Also, I got the chance to see something rare... So that's the magic projectile, Tathlum. A delayed spell applied with activation conditions on objects to be used as projectiles. Shooting magic that activates movement magic simply by launching by hand. I don't know how long the delayed spell can persist, but when faced against enemies, it allows the user to fire single shots, repeated shots, or firing all at once as they please without the need to operate a CAD or

construct magic sequences. I see now, it's definitely a spell worthy of being the prestigious Goldie family's trump card."

Only after he finished did Tomitsuka notice the change in mood.

"...Observing to such an extent after seeing it once, rather, shouldn't I say: as expected of a direct descendent of the Tomitsuka--one of the strongest among the Hundred Families?"

"Oh? Umm... Akechi-san?"

"...How regrettable, to think we could've been friends..."

"Huh? Eh? Why are you using past tense?"

"Tomitsuka-kun, let me tell you some good news."

An intense alarm sounded in Hagane's mind.

But for some reason, his feet felt rooted to the ground.

"Uh... What...?"

"A secret technique is called 'secret' because it must be kept confidential at all costs."

"Whoa~! Hold it right there!"

The cards in Eimi's right hand opened in fan shape, causing Hagane to wave his hands in a panic at the sight.

Not only that, he also frantically took off his hat and mask.

"I won't tell anyone! I'll keep it a secret! Read my lips! My face doesn't look like I'm lying, right!?"

He had apparently taken off his mask to deliver these words.

Hagane suddenly prostrated himself on the ground, causing Eimi's pressure to plummet, unable to continue acting serious.

"...Jeez, whatever. After all, I got to see an interesting dance just now."

"S-sure~"

This time it was Hagane's turn to sound troubled, still kneeling on the ground.

This sound alone was enough for Eimi to conclude that Hagane did not want others to know about his type of conjuring tricks. It was probably the secret trump card that Hagane had innovated on his own. In that case, things were simple.

"Very well, let's keep each other's secret!"

Eimi knelt down (naturally with her legs together to prevent exposing the underside of her miniskirt) to meet Hagane's gaze at eye level. Hagane immediately smiled shyly and nodded.

"Oh, I almost forgot!"

Probably feeling relieved, Eimi suddenly stood up and took out her CAD from under her skirt.

While Hagane watched in puzzlement, thinking "what's up?", she activated a magic spell.

This magic manifested its effects in the form of light, heat and odor.

The cards buried in the men in black's bodies suddenly ignited, cauterizing the wounds before turning into ash.

"Elimination of evidence and halting the bleeding, done. Now then, part-timer Tomitsuka-kun."

"W-What is it?"

Eimi suddenly switched to a coaxing tone of voice, naturally causing Hagane to feel wary.

But there existed many things in this world where being wary was still futile.

"Injuries occurring in the park premises means that staff is responsible for medical care, right? And if those injured people are carrying illegal weapons, it's also the staff's responsibility to call the police, right?"



"Akechi-san... Are you trying to shove all the work on me?"

"How dare you say that I've shoving things on you, of course not! But think about it, I'm just a 'customer' today, after all. And my friends are waiting for me."

"...So unfair."

Eimi remained unfazed despite Hagane's gaze of resentment.

"Very well, that's settled then~ See you in school, Tomitsuka-kun!"

Eimi rapidly left the scene with just a turn and a wave of apology. Watching her leave, Hagane's expression slowly turned from a poker face to a wry smile, finally ending with a long sigh.

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Eimi finally managed to meet up with Subaru and Akaha. The trio sat down to a lunch of crepes on a bench. When a member of park staff dressed in a vertically striped outfit passed by, Eimi raised a question aimed at no one in particular.

"This place is clearly Wonderland so why don't they dress up as rabbits...?"

"Come on... Wouldn't that lead to copyright problems?"

"Hmm? You actually want a bunny boy to serve you, Amy?"

"Of course not! Sheesh... I was just thinking, since it's not every day that one gets to visit a land of wonderment, it'd be better if the staff dressed up to give a more immersive feeling."

"What kind of outfit would feel more immersive?"

"Hmm~ ...Lemme think, maybe magicians with Venetian style masks or something like that?"

Surfacing in Eimi's mind was a monochrome clown akin to a certain phantom, but she had a feeling that young children would cry in fright if they saw that look, hence she searched her mind for similar images.

"Oh, that might not be bad."

"Yes, I agree. Sounds interesting."

Then every time park staff passed by, the girls would enjoy the fun of virtual dressing up in their minds, chatting "not like that, not like this." Meanwhile, Eimi was secretly contemplating extremely dangerous ideas, from Hagane's perspective, such as "it might be nice to have Tomitsuka-kun dressed up as a bunny boy."

# *Friendship, Trust, and the Dubious Lolicon*

Third High School, which is affiliated with the National Magic University, is located outside Kanazawa City in the Ishikawa Prefecture. Because of the wide scale shift of district lines under the current district system, it is properly called the "former Ishikawa Prefecture," but people, including the mass media, normally refer to former prefectures and their capitals by their old names. Probably out of habit. It could be that "Ishikawa Prefecture" is also used instead of "The Domain of Kaga" or "The Country of Noto" because "it’s what we’re used to".

It's not really important.

In the reference room of Third High School, located outside Kanazawa City in the Ishikawa Prefecture, Kichijouji Shinkurou stopped working so diligently on his manuscript and did a gigantic stretch. He might be on the brink of ruining it by trying to improve it, so he took off the headset for the brain wave assistant interface and once again made a big arch with his back.

He’d been working longer than he’d thought; it would probably be best to make that posture again. The sound of bones cracking back into place continued; the feel of small aches and pains made Kichijouji scowl.

Since he was taking a break from writing for now, he turned his face away. There was no window in the reference room since it might potentially be used to inspect the highly confidential documents, but, perhaps for refreshing purpose, on the side of a wall in the small private room was a window-emulating display that switched between different landscapes. The ‘landscape’ he could see from this private room was of a grove of trees deep in the mountains wavering in a gentle wind; Kichijouji was fond of this scene.

What he’d been working on was the manuscript he would use for his presentation for "The National High School Magic Theory Thesis

Competition sponsored by the Japanese Magic Association" at the end of October. Kichijouji was a world renowned magic researcher as well a first year high school student, so he'd been chosen as a member of Third High School's representatives. His personal preparations had begun before summer vacation, but ever since the Nine Schools Competition had ended, he had become overzealous about writing his manuscript — even he himself felt so.

He was also aware of the reason.

It was the rivalry he felt with that boy he met at the Nine Schools Competition, Shiba Tatsuya.

Until the Nine Schools Competition, Kichijouji had never felt that he was inferior to anyone around his own age in Magic Theory. In fact, he had almost no memories of ever feeling rivalry with anyone. Aside from the practical side of Magic, the realm outside of magic theory, in terms of owners of brains equal to his own which discovered the "Cardinal Code", Kichijouji prided himself on being the only one in his age group whose brain was at this level not only within the country, but even if taking the worldwide viewpoint.

And, he was not being conceited. In the world of the study of magic, there were currently new scientific findings being announced day by day, but scientific findings that equaled the "Cardinal Code" were no more than once a year at the most. Kichijouji Shinkurou's achievement was that rare and valuable.

However, his vanity had been crushed a number of times in the last Nine Schools Competition. At least, Kichijouji himself felt so.

The theoretical is accompanied by the practical, for the first time that had meaning. In the world of magic research, this was a widely supported way of thinking; in this country especially, the concept was common sense and a widely diffused premise.

Kichijouji also considered that a natural idea. Magical theory in the end is something for the purpose of using technical skills called magic; a theory that can not be put into practice is ridiculous. If the

study of magic is to promote learning, then sooner or later it might advance to include the study of logical concepts to explain reality that were purely mental constructs. However, the modern study of magic was not at that level.

And, in regards to the way theory is useful for practice, the technique demonstrated by that guy, First High School First Year — Shiba Tatsuya, had carved a sense of defeat into Kichijouji's heart. Not just knowledge, not just technique, but the power of the two unified to make him actually feel that the sum was greater than the parts.

That left Kichijouji immensely aggravated.

Knowledge and technique were the cornerstones of his self-confidence. He who could never win against "them" in power was so useful to "them" that he was an utter necessity, and another person could not outperform him. Therefore, Kichijouji pledged to himself that he would redeem himself from his loss during the Nine Schools Competition at the Thesis Competition. He considered victory over First High School at the Thesis Competition to be the shortest route to regaining his self confidence, which he needed to do.

For that reason, directly after the Nine Schools Competition was over, he spent almost every day confined in this reference room working hard composing his presentation speech.

Speaking of the aftermath of the Nine Schools Competition.

—Ichijou's state of mind seemed a little off—

That phrase fell into Kichijouji's ears some days rarely, some days frequently.

He made no objection to calling Masaki's condition as off. Kichijouji himself thought so. He was also aware that it was not just his imagination. After all, Kichijouji knew the reason Masaki was "off".

(…Despite that, there isn't really anything I can do)

Kichijouji probably could not be attacked for not being a "true friend". After all, Masaki was afflicted with a disease that had from

old been called "a sickness no doctor can cure" and "not soothed by hot springs therapy".

Kichijouji accepted it. Ichijou Masaki was suffering from "Love Sickness".

"Shiba Miyuki"

That was the name of the one Masaki had fallen for.

It was inconceivable that the next head of that Ichijou clan could be tormented by love troubles — but he was. Masaki with his brains, good looks and pedigree was the type that did not have to do anything to have a pack of girls after him; the reason for his torment was not anything like him being a neophyte, a complete prude, or a sexual deviant or anything like that — there really was no reason for him not to confess his feelings and end his torment of unrequited love, Kichijouji thought.

Even he himself couldn’t keep his heart from beating faster when he recalled that girl’s image.

The girl was that lovely. Not like a flesh and blood person, if someone said she was the fantasy of a teenage boy transformed into a three dimensional image by super science, he could just about believe it. Even without relying on a photo, his brain could revive her clear image; once or twice, he had gotten the feeling that she was some sort of dream or product of some wild delusion.

Since even he who had no feelings of affection toward her was in this state, Masaki who had fallen in love with her probably couldn’t help becoming more distracted than was usual for him.

In his case, she was an unreachable goal that inspire feelings of awe. Thanks to that (probably), the matter ended without inciting hopeless feelings of unrequited love; however, in Masaki’s case, in part due to the potential of actually getting her, the illness had become unnecessarily severe.

The name of Shiba Miyuki had special meaning for Kichijouji above and beyond that of being the subject of Masaki’s unrequited love.

She was Shiba Tatsuya’s younger sister.

The younger sister of the guy he held animosity for held his friend’s heart.

The inner workings Kichijouji’s heart were more complex than he knew.

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"George."

The sun was almost completely past the western horizon with just an edge was passing through when Kichijouji turned around towards the voice that called him just as he was leaving school.

"Masaki."

Even without turning around, he had recognized him by voice alone. Before he could turn around, the owner of the name he spoke caught up to him mid-turn.

"You’re already leaving, right? If that’s so, let’s go together."

"Sure, if you're fine with it."

Kichijouji’s remark was another words for "you won't go out of your way".

Almost every day, Kichijouji returned directly to the school dormitory. In contrast, Masaki made numerous detours hither and thither on his way home. These were not all recreational (though a lot of times he was just playing around), as the number of times that the eldest son of the Ichijou clan had to run around on family business were not few.

"Oh, today I don’t really have anything special to do. ...All right. George, it’s been awhile so let’s visit my house."

"Wouldn’t there be a problem if I just dropping in without warning?"

To his friend’s sudden suggestion, Kichijouji presented a common sense response. However, Masaki lightly laughed it away.

"Don’t say anything to imply that we’re not close. Besides, if it's you, that family of mine will always give a warm welcome."

"Really? Got it. I’ll drop in."

Masaki invited Kichijouji, who lived alone, out of friendship without any guile. However, Kichijouji had reasons for why he could not freely accept the Ichijou family’s good will.

In the first place, he did not have any reason to dislike visiting Masaki’s family. Since Masaki was going straight home and he did not need to worry about interfering with any business he had on the way, Kichijouji displayed no real hesitation when he nodded his acceptance of Masaki’s invitation.

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Masaki’s house was a mere thirty minute walk from school. Commuting to school did not take thirty minutes; walking took thirty minutes. Naturally, the fact that Third High School and the Ichijou mansion were within walking distance of each other was a simple coincidence. There was no background detail like the school being useful to the Ichijou clan or the principal working for them, no matter what was whispered in places. In the first place, Third High School, like the other magic high schools, was a national high school affiliated with the National Magic University. Deciding the placement of high schools was in the jurisdiction of government offices; the Ten Master Clans were ostensibly private citizens so affecting the

planning was not within the Ichijou clan’s reach. —The Ten Master Clans would also not use their influence in a matter like this.

The thirty minute route took Masaki and Kichijouji twenty-five minutes without hurrying. With the season’s long day already past, the twilight sky was dipped in purple for a while. Since Kichijouji thought that the members of the Ichijou family would not be home yet, he was a little surprised to be hailed as he passed through the gate into the garden.

"Ah, Shinkurou-kun, welcome."

The cheerful voice speaking to him had the high pitched soprano of a child.

"Akane-chan, hello, pardon me."

The one who greeted Kichijouji with a smile was Masaki’s younger sister, Ichijou Akane. Akane was a sixth year elementary student, but Masaki also had another sister younger than her. Kichijouji had not had many chances to talk to that sister who was a third year elementary student, but Akane had attached herself to him long ago, so whenever he visited the Ichijou residence, she would always pop in to see him at least once whether she was there when he arrived or not. He did not know how serious she was, but she had said "I will become Shinkurou-kun’s bride someday".

The first time he heard this statement, Kichijouji was not all that old; by the third time, he was puzzled. When she first proclaimed her intentions to him two years before, Akane was still a fourth year elementary student at that time and all she was to him was Masaki’s younger sister who would grow to be a vivacious beauty in the future. Kichijouji himself was a second year middle school student at the time; proposals of marriage and the like did not seem all that real to him. On the other hand, he did not hate Akane for any reason and since he felt indebted to the Ichijou family, he could not treat her coldly, so Kichijouji at that time was at a complete loss on how to handle it.

He had not received such a clear "confession of love" in about a year, but Akane had teetered on the edges in her words. Kichijouji no longer felt bewildered about the situation, so she might have gradually breached his defenses. Kichijouji himself was unaware of this, however.

Well, since Masaki would not accept getting into any situation that made him look like he should receive the slur of lolicon (by that he meant Masaki wouldn’t accept anyone going after his sister while she was still a child), even if the outer gate of the castle had been raised, it was up to Masaki to decide when to raise the inner gate.

It seemed like she was just about to leave for practice, so he parted from Akane there. That being said, since Kichijouji probably couldn’t leave until after he dined with them for supper, he would probably meet her again later on.

The master of the house, Ichijou Gouki — Masaki’s father, the head of the Ichijou Clan — had not yet returned home. In order to support their position as leaders in the magician community and their personal military potential, the Ten Master Clans and the additional eighteen families managed, and sometimes invested, the assets they had been endowed with to an extent that was not very well known. There were cases of some of them officially being at the "local bigwig" level while unofficially controlling an international corporation effectively (one corporation owned another corporation which owned another corporation…), but the Ichijou clan’s interests were not that widespread. An undersea mining company was the official Ichijou family business. If no irregular situation occurred, Kichijouji knew Gouki would probably return in time for the evening meal.

On the other hand, Masaki’s mother was a housewife, but she was absent as well. She was probably out shopping. This was an era where everyday items and food as well could be supplied by online shopping, but women who wanted to look at the actual goods were numerous, especially among the lady of the manor class. Kichijouji felt it wasn’t all that different from online shopping as the goods were

still delivered instead of being brought by the shoppers when they went home, but that might be only be the male point of view.

The Ichijou mansion was a grand residence roughly ten times the scale of an average separated house residence, but did not employ a lot of live-in maids and other type of servants. When the clan gathered, or when it hosted guests related to the society of magicians, and on similar occasions, they hire people from friendly local inns and restaurants. The garden needed specialized skills which were satisfied by periodically calling on a landscape gardener. In contrast to the families like the Saegusa and Itsuwa, who were fellow Ten Master Clans and surrounded themselves with a large number of servants, they operated under the policy of "if a machine could do it, then a machine would do it" and extensively used home automation.

Today, there were no special guests expected. Since there was no need to be polite to anyone in the unpopulated hallway, the two male high school students went straight to Masaki’s room.

Masaki’s room was, if you use traditional measurements, a six tatami western style room which is not considered an especially big room by conventional wisdom. But, in accordance with the upper class modern architectural style, the bed, closet and other furnishings could be stored within the wall and accessed by a wall mural, guaranteeing that even a six tatami room would have plenty of space.

Completely at home in his friend’s room, Kichijouji stowed the bed away, drew out the counter stool style table from the opposing wall using the mural, and put his butt down on one of the chairs that came with the table.

Masaki took two nice and cold glasses of blended tea from the small refrigerator within his room. One was placed in front of Kichijouji, the other remained in his hand as he sat down on the opposite side from Kichijouji.

"George, what state is the manuscript in?"

"Thank you for your concern, Masaki. It’s all good."

Kichijouji answered the seated Masaki’s inquiry, modestly concealing the confidence in his smiling face.

"How about you, Masaki? The gossip I’ve been hearing says that you’ve been doing some reckless things."

Kichijouji had heard a large amount of hearsay about Masaki’s activities after the Nine Schools Competition, especially about Masaki’s extremely difficult training regimen. He could understand Masaki’s motive. Like Kichijouji, who felt defeated by Shiba Tatsuya in CAD application and tuning, Masaki probably felt bitter over the defeat in Monolith Code and wanted payback.

"Not so bad. And I’m probably not going to see immediate results."

"That might be true."

Masaki’s voice was carefully casual as he responded to Kichijouji’s question about his mental condition. He was more volatile than expected, but he wasn’t feeling the gloomy implacability he had worried about. Relieved on that point, Kichijouji agreed in a light tone.

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Immediately after the electronic ping rang, Masaki let loose a groan from his core.

"George… it’s time."

"But this is the last one? Is using up time in the middle stage really okay?"

Kichijouji asked for confirmation over their monitors that were placed back to back and Masaki gave a weak nod.

Both screens suspended the real time battle simulation game. It looked like a still shot of a cityscape where all time and movement had frozen and Masaki switched the image to a bird’s eye view. In

that way, he could see how much the monitor encroached on Masaki’s attention. Kichijouji felt like smiling at this friend’s indomitable spirit that was earnestly agonizing over this activity, he consciously keeping his face loose and unsmiling. Naturally, this wasn’t necessary. Since clearly with his eyes so fixated on the monitor, Masaki did not have any ability to pay attention to anything else.

Besides, although this game was for fun, it could not be looked at as a mere diversion. The scenarios in this simulation game had been created by the Magic University’s Military Research department; the algorithm had been upgraded by each division of the defense forces, so its urban combat scenarios for magicians were so accurate that it could be used for practice simulations.

"…Waiting in ambush there is probably a little too evil. And also, deliberately descending the rope without magic and the rest…"

Masaki’s grumbling might have been a monologue. Nevertheless, Kichijouji soon responded to his remarks.

"Leaving aside your point about the ambush, haven’t we seen the tactic of deliberately not using magic because it would draw the opponent’s attention recently, Masaki?"

Kichijouji’s tone had not changed from conversational, but Masaki’s response was to snap his eyes open and grind his back teeth with great vigor.

"That guy…"

"Yes. The tactic he used against Second High School in the Newcomers Tournament of Monolith Code."

Masaki used "that guy" and Kichijouji used "he" for the same person, First High School first year Shiba Tatsuya; between the two of them there was no need to verify that they meant the same person.

While agreeing to Masaki’s words, Kichijouji opened up the game menu screenshot and chose save and close. After all, he knew Masaki’s mind was no longer on the game.

A pause inquiry appeared on Masaki’s monitor. Masaki chose "yes" and extinguished his monitor; like Kichijouji, he shut his notebook style terminal and turned to face him again.

The first to open his mouth was Kichijouji.

"Masaki, for better or worse I think you overuse Oudou[3]."

"That touched a nerve."

At Kichijouji’s point, Masaki made a pained smile and shook his head.

"I don’t like saying these things, but for now I want you to listen."

Kichijouji face was slightly stiff as he spoke, and the smile had disappeared from his lips.

"I don’t intend to be closed-minded about this matter. What else?"

"I know, sorry."

Instead of doing what Masaki said, Kichijouji used words to continue easing the tension.

"Oudou is not a bad thing, since Oudou is the most practical and fastest path you can use to reach a destination. Besides, even if I tell you to use a lot of surprise moves and clever tricks, it wouldn’t really suit your personality, Masaki."

"Yeah, that’s probably true."

Once again, Masaki’s face sported a pained smile. This time Kichijouji did not seem to take it as a rebuke and a tinge of laughter entered his voice.

"Good. Since that is definitely true, Masaki."

While a smile was on his face, Kichijouji narrowed his eyes even further. In a certain sense, it was a dazzling expression.

"Did you mean that as praise?"

However, Masaki responded in a tone that made a joke of it; perhaps he didn’t notice, or was pretending not to notice, or possibly there was another explanation.

"Relax, since it’s mostly a compliment."

"Mostly, eh."

As if they had it planned for it to happen, the two simultaneously started chuckling.

"After all not only is it impossible for Masaki to use the same kind of tactics as he does, it is also probably not necessary."

Immediately after the laughter disappeared, Kichijouji returned to the topic with serious expression on his face.

"I think what Masaki must learn is not how to use clever tricks but how to deal with clever tricks."

"…You don’t just mean in simulation games by that, do you?"

Kichijouji nodded visibly to the uncertain tone and gaze.

"True, I’m not just talking about simulation games. I am going to speak plainly."

As he spoke, Kichijouji temporarily trimmed away any placating phrases.

"If all we do is train in a reckless manner, next year’s Nine Schools Competition will probably be the same kind of failure as this year’s was."

There was a small silence until Masaki raised a question to be certain he understood the meaning beneath that remark.

"Are you saying my way of doing things is wrong?"

"I did not say it was meaningless."

While Kichijouji’s reply was indirect, there was no room for misunderstanding.

"If that’s all you train, you’ll need outside help. Training will become your flesh and blood."

But Masaki was not confused by the superficial encouragement. That he intuitively understood what Kichijouji wanted to say was evident by his next words.

"But victory and defeat are not determined by strength alone."

Even though he had anticipated them, Kichijouji’s words were a bitter pill for Masaki to swallow.

"Masaki. Even now, I believe you are more powerful than Shiba Tatsuya."

"But, I lost."

Masaki’s tone was flat, as if he did not want to hear his own words.

"I know that. It wasn’t just you, Masaki. I, too, lost to the Yoshida family’s magician of Ancient Magic. In spite of the fact, I am the clear winner in terms of speed. We also lost as a team to First High School. Our opponents’ true power surpassed our expectations. That is certainly true, however…"

On the other hand, a hint of caution was displayed in Kichijouji’s voice as if he was furiously thinking, rechecking his conclusions as he spoke them.

"I think where we ultimately failed was in the field of strategy. Additionally, rather than being entrapped by our opponents’ plan, my opinion is we screwed up."

With this statement of Kichijouji, Masaki tilted his head with a doubtful look on his face.

"I don’t think there was anything wrong in George’s strategy, but…"

Masaki’s words weren’t meant to comfort Kichijouji, this was what he really thought.

However, Kichijouji shook his head at those words.

"No, my strategy was wrong. Looking back, I certainly sunk us with the plan."

"…I don’t really understand what you mean."

"To be brief. I probably shouldn’t have ‘meddled with the plan’ in that match. I shouldn’t have concentrated on controlling our opponents’ actions; it would have been better if we had kept to our usual way of fighting."

As Masaki questioned him with a look, Kichijouji cut off his words, and read the fact that Masaki still wasn’t getting it from his face; while thinking ‘it can’t be helped’, Kichijouji continued explaining.

"It was not necessary for Masaki to get close to him in that match."

It can’t be helped, he thought again, this is how I am useful to Masaki. Kichijouji did not realize how much joy he felt over being able to compensate for Masaki’s weak spots.

"If we had kept to Masaki’s original style, long distance bombardment, we wouldn’t have lost that advantage. Since the open field setting was without vegetation, it was not necessary to guard against attacks from blind spots. I was probably concentrating on him too much."

Masaki did not say anything to console him and nodded as Kichijouji placed the blame on himself.

"The cause of our defeat in that match was my mistakes in strategy. But, there is a point I also want Masaki to reflect on."

"Uh-oh, this time it’s my turn, huh."

As Masaki purposely appeared taken aback, Kichijouji replied with a broad and evil grin.

"You were following the plan, but, Masaki, if you had been a little more wary of your opponent’s tricks, you could’ve avoided that last sound attack. Masaki, you chose to intercept when he closed the gap between the two of you for hand to hand combat, but there would have been a different result if you had leaped back for a moment."

"That really touched a nerve… in short, George, you’re trying to tell me not to become a daredevil, to remember to hold the line?"

They took preventive measures to keep the mood of their after action review from becoming too serious and to a certain extent they were successful.

"A little different. I think I said it before, but tricks don’t suit you, Masaki. And also, I don’t think you have to learn trickery yourself; I think it would be better if you learn what to do if you’ve fallen for one of your opponent’s ploys."

"Specifically?"

Masaki was neither depressed nor rebellious over Kichijouji’s harsh criticism and asked for a positive plan of action to fix his weaknesses. For a long time, this had been the way the pair operated.

"I think we need to work on situational judgment: when to temporarily retreat to take a look at the situation, when to smash through to victory by sheer power, and when to play for time and consult those who are acting as your staff officers. For the rest, developing the sensitivity to know something is going on."

Masaki mulled over the proposal he received from Kichijouji with a sour look. This face probably indicated that he had been already aware of what he needed to do himself. Kichijouji did not doubt that the admonition of touching a nerve indicated that Masaki was giving his words his complete attention.

"Therefore, instead of abusing our body, let’s forge our minds. Not with games like this one — I will seek a strategic simulation game that is closer to realistic war conditions for us."

"Urk…"

Within the low moan of Masaki’s voice, real actual gloom could be heard; without thinking, Kichijouji burst out laughing.

"Sounds like you’re enjoying yourself, Shinkurou-kun. What are you talking about?"

Just as Kichijouji was sniggering, Akane knocked and at once opened the door and entered the room.

"Akane… I’ve always told you to wait until you get an answer before you open the door, right?"

Masaki admonished his sister.

"Isn’t it okay since Shinkurou-kun is here? If the one Nii-san was holed up with here was a girl then even I would have restrained myself."

Akane, without a trace of demureness, approached the table facing Kichijouji and Masaki.

"Akane, err."

"What. You don’t want anything to drink Nii-san?"

Masaki’s pained expression changed to a sour one without him speaking and while Kichijouji watched over the siblings’ warm (crude) exchange, Akane set down two glasses of iced coffee and one glass of iced cocoa.

Masaki queried about the extra glass without a word.

Akane answered her brother’s question with an impish look and discreetly sat down on the chair next to Kichijouji. —While Akane had placed the glasses on the table, Kichijouji had tactfully moved the things that they had been storing on the stool. Apparently scenes like this were a normal occurrence for this household.

"Hey, Shinkurou-kun, why were you laughing? Nii-san did something ridiculous again?"

While sitting on the stool, Akane turned her gaze and the rest of her towards Kichijouji.

"Akane, are those really the kind of words you should say to your own brother…"

To his little sister who was clearly having fun at his expense, Masaki made an extremely earnest objection — that is to say, he attacked her with complaints, however.

"I didn’t say it to Nii-san. I was addressing Shinkurou-kun."

Receiving this truly impertinent answer, Masaki was too speechless to even make a faux pas.

Possibly satisfied for now by joking with Kichijouji, Akane left the room after about five minutes.

The two high school boys exchanged a tired laugh over being toyed with by an elementary school girl. No matter how young a "woman" is, she is still undoubtedly a "woman".

"…Sorry, she’s troublesome"

"Hahahaha…"

Kichijouji replied with meaningless laughter to the apology spoken by Masaki, who was so crestfallen that his shoulders drooped.

"No, umm, isn’t it good that she’s spirited?"

Kichijouji tried to come up with something safe and comforting to say, but,

"As her elder brother, I wish she would exercise that spirit more discreetly, but..."

Masaki was not able to stop whining. On the contrary, his monologue of "compared to that guy’s sister", "Why does that person have to be

that guy’s sister", "I’m jealous", "It’s so unfair" "Darn it, unforgivable!" and the like gradually escalated. Slowly, Kichijouji realized that if he couldn’t detour him from this path, it would get really bad.

"Now, now. I think Akane-chan is fine."

He said, but,

"George, you…"

Unfortunately, Kichijouji had made a critical error in his phrasing.

"If you go for that type, I’m not going to say anything crude, but…"

"Eh?"

Receiving a look mixed with revulsion and wariness from Masaki, Kichijouji at last realized his screw up.

"At least wait till she graduates from elementary school before courting her, for my sake, please."

"Uh, umm..."

Kichijouji intended to explain that he was wrong. What he actually meant to say was "I think Akane-chan’s personality is fine the way it is".

"I trust you, George. Say you’re not a lolicon, please."

However, for some reason not one word of "denial" made its way out of his throat. Maybe he was unable to say a word that might be interpreted as a rejection of Akane; if Masaki took it that way he might not be able to continue his relationship with the Ichijou family due to the misunderstanding… unfortunately, those thoughts instantly struck Kichijouji.

Mending his friendship with Masaki was more important than correcting the misunderstanding.

Subconsciously.

He wasn’t even aware of it himself.

"Absolutely! I am not a lolicon!"

For no reason he knew of, Kichijouji once again failed to correct the mistake and he let the big mix-up remain out of his own will.

He did not have any freedom to think about what kind of earthquake might come from the big fault line in his relationship with Masaki that the mix up created; Kichijouji could do no more than endure Masaki's cool stare. —Even if you called it an earthquake, this was nothing more than a private matter in the first place.

Kichijouji did not even have the freedom to do anything like wishing for an unknown time in the future in which he could think. Finally unable to endure any more, Kichijouji changed the subject in desperation.

"Enough about me, Masaki how about you!? Have you made a little progress with her?"

It's too late for regrets. Though, it's normal for regret to come after. The moment after the words he spoke to change the subject left his mouth, Kichijouji thought "Aw, nuts…" with intense regret.

"If by her you mean 'that her' then no progress."

The frozen expressionless look on his face was more stone mask than poker face; in a voice that matched the face, Masaki made answers like "none" and "I've gained nothing".

"…What?"

A voice shouted stop in his heart. That was the voice of Kichijouji's common sense. But by the time his inhibitions returned, Kichijouji's tongue and lips could not help forming questions.

"You can't get in touch with her?"

"I didn't ask for her contact information."

"Why!? Didn't you dance with her, Masaki. She did not seem to dislike you."

"I don’t think she hated me either. But, it’s hopeless."

He could hear the emotions Masaki was holding back in his voice; even Kichijouji felt so much pressure he found it difficult to breathe.

"But, why!?"

"She’s that guy’s sister. Until I erase the stain of defeat, I feel unworthy to pursue her."

Kichijouji did not say that he thought the girl would not care about that. He thought it would be irresponsible to say that without due consideration; even if that was the truth, it would be meaningless since it did not keep it from bothering Masaki.

He did not feel like laughing it off as foolish stubbornness. Quite the contrary, he wouldn’t be Masaki if he did not get obstinate about this type of thing, Kichijouji thought.

His next words gushed out easily from within him without hesitation or calculation.

"I’ll help you, Masaki. No, not help you. Let’s wipe out the stain of defeat together."

"Yeah. I’m counting on you."

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Masaki’s father, Gouki, had a sudden dinner meeting with a client, so he would be coming home late today.

Naturally, he cancelled dinner. Five people gathered around the dining table for the Ichijou family evening meal: Masaki; Midori, his mother; Akane; Masaki’s even younger sister, Ruri; and Kichijouji. Masaki sat across from Kichijouji with Ruri next to him. Kichijouji sat next to Akane and Midori sat at the head of the table to watch over all of them.

The mood of the evening meal was the usual one. Akane was gaily chatting to Kichijouji; across from them, Ruri was silently working her chopsticks.

Masaki was flicking his gaze back and forth between his sisters being a busybody and Midori was watching over her children’s actions with a bright smile.

It had been three weeks since Kichijouji had last partaken an evening meal with the Ichijou family. That being said, because ten of those days were the period spent on the Nine Schools competition (the total days actually spent was two weeks), it had not really been a long period of time.

"Shinkurou-kun, it’s been a while since you’ve come to our house. Have you been busy?"

Nevertheless, it seemed like Midori viewed it differently.

"That’s right. It would be better if he came over to play more often."

As expected, Akane voiced her agreement. Kichijouji did not commit the folly of objecting.

"You probably just want to play."

"Oh, Nii-san jealous? It’s ok-ay, because I won’t take Shinkurou-kun away from Nii-san."

"Id-i-ot. George and I don’t have that kind of relationship."

In response to Akane’s negative statement, Masaki started to raise his voice without thinking but he restrained himself.

"Who are you calling idiot! Humph, you can only afford to act like that now. Since friendship is fleeting in the face of love."

"Lo-Love!? Akane, you’re way too precocious for an elementary student!"

"Don’t mock elementary students!? What about you Niisan, you’re already a high school student and you don’t have a girlfriend!"

"Akane, there are things you shouldn’t say…!"

"Both of you are too loud."

"Ruri!? You don’t speak like that to your elder sister!"

"My my, Masaki, Akane, Ruri, all of you settle down. Why don’t we enjoy our food?"

Participating in such an uninhibited conversation was not something Kichijouji could do.

He took care not to let his envy show and also made sure no one realized his smile was fake so that he could look at the happy circle of the Ichijou family with what looked like a happy face.

—Because she could see he was acting like an outsider, the next words came from Akane’s mouth.

"I’ve got it, Kichijouji should live here."

"Oh, Akane. Great idea."

Kichijouji did not have time to break in — the next blow came from Midori.

"Yes, it is! This house has too many unused rooms. Hey, Shinkurou-kun, get out of the dorm and stay at our house."

"No, there’s no way I could put myself in your debt so much…"

Kichijouji wasn’t merely being polite, these were his true feelings. No, there was an unmistakable element of politeness, but he was not just refusing for form’s sake — this was a genuine polite refusal.

"Shinkurou-kun, wouldn’t it be better to say yes?"

Since she was sincere, Midori’s saying such a thing only made Kichijouji more uncomfortable. It wasn’t that he hated the idea of living with the Ichijou family, rather, it was because a part of him found it enticing that he was confused over how to refuse.

If Masaki hadn’t thrown him a lifeline, Kichijouji might have been overwhelmed by Midori.



"Kaa-san… Akane aside, please stop saying such things that make George uncomfortable. This matter was discussed enough two years ago, right?"

Right. The subject of staying with the Ichijou family had also come up two years ago. He had refused it himself and chosen to continue living in the dorms — thanks to Masaki's assistance, he remembered that close call.

"I'm sorry, Midori-san."

Since it had been impressed on him in various ways that he should not call her anything like Oba-san, "Midori-san" spun easily out of Kichijouji's mouth.

"I can't become more indebted to you, it would be too painful, and it is often convenient to be in a dorm that is attached to a laboratory."

The latter half of his statement was in no way a lie. Third High School was at the former site of the first laboratory of the Kanazawa Magic Research Institute, which is the research institute Kichijouji was attached to and the place he also discovered the "Cardinal Code" at. The dorm built at that site had facilities to conduct experiments late at night and designed so that no one had to "sleep in a huddle in the hallway" to conduct research and HD panels with convenient supplies for emergencies.

But that was an add-on, an additional reason; the first part, "I can't become more indebted to you" expressed Kichijouji's true feelings.

"Really? …If you change your mind, you can move in anytime. We would not think of it as any trouble at all."

Midori saw Kichijouji's attitude toward this matter as his usual stubbornness and did not persist in inviting him further. Akane was a little unhappy, but she stopped with making a face; she might have realized that twisting Kichijouji's arm any further would ruin his mood.

While Kichijouji was relieved that Midori and Akane had eased off, he worried that he might have caused his benefactors, the Ichijou family, to feel depressed. But although he was dependent on the kindness of Midori, Akane, and the others, there were some emotions within his heart that he could do nothing about.

—Three years prior, acting in conjunction with the Great Asian Alliance's invasion of Okinawa, the New Soviet Union invaded Sado. Even now, the New Soviet Union denied participating in the invasion; however, without a doubt those troops belonged to that nation.

The invading troops were only a small detachment of the overall invasion force. However, even so, that was enough military power to quash the Island of Sado. Kichijouji, who was living on Sado at the time, became a war orphan with the loss of his father and mother in that conflict.

Both of Kichijouji's parents had also been magic researchers. At that time on Sado, there was a facility dedicated to experiments to clarify the nature of psions using below ground impressions; both Kichijouji's father and mother worked at that facility. It was said that the facility was the target of the New Soviet Union's invading troops. The research facility bore the brunt of the invading army's surprise attack; over half of the employees got caught in the battle between the invaders and defenders and lost their lives.

A mere single day of tragedy. On that day, at 10AM, he received word that unidentified troops were invading in a surprise attack; Kichijouji had been unable to contact his parents, and he had been evacuated to a shelter near his school under the guidance of the staff of his middle school.

Although he prayed for his parent's safety inside the shelter, Kichijouji had already been mature enough to have a realistic premonition of disaster.

However, Kichijouji was still childish enough at the time to tremble, feeling powerless, forgetting that he had magic of his own as a weapon.

The ones who rescued Kichijouji, who had squatted in the shelter enduring the terror, were a heroic group of volunteer soldiers spearheaded by the Ichijou clan—

That time was not the only time they had saved him from terrifying peril.

Masaki’s father, Gouki, also pulled some strings to allow him to intern at a magic theory research institute while he was still a mere first year middle school student. With both his parents dying simultaneously and having no other relatives, Kichijouji, who would have had to enter one of the infamous orphanages for magicians, had a place to live and the means to pay for his expenses thanks to the Ichijou clan. This was not just a belief of Kichijouji, this was an objective fact.

Soon after entering the research institute, his unique natural talents as a magic researcher blossomed and by his deed of discovering "the Cardinal Code," he had repaid that favor — no, Kichijouji would never be able to forget that act of kindness. He should never consider himself finished with paying that favor.

Kichijouji had decided in his heart to make repaying the Ichijou clan for their support a mission he would spend his whole life doing.

For he himself to become a member of the Ichijou family, even as a simple lodger, was something too astounding for Kichijouji to contemplate.

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With Kichijouji employed as her home tutor, who would come once a week, Akane’s good humor was restored. The debits and credits of

this transaction made a one sided minus on Kichijouji’s side but he was not the least bit dissatisfied. Instead, having an excuse to visit the family once a week made him unconsciously joyous.

The meal ended, Kichijouji went and collected his things from Masaki’s room and made bows in the Ichijou foyer.

"Thank you, for the delicious meal."

"No no, it was not all that great. I am sorry. It is gracious of you to say you liked it."

"Don’t be ridiculous. I like Midori-san’s home cooking."

"Oh, really, thank you."

It definitely took a while for Midori to release him from the demurring battle.

"Kaa-san, you need to get back soon. Aren’t Akane and Ruri waiting?"

Masaki’s two younger sisters were in the midst of cleaning up after the meal. Kichijouji thought it would have been alright to leave washing dishes and the rest to a HAR (Home Automation Robot), but under Midori’s policy of "I’d be too embarrassed to let a daughter of mine leave the house to become a bride, if she can’t even do this much", the girls did a daily chore rotation of cooking, cleaning, and laundry.

"Oh, that’s true. Then Shinkurou-kun, come over to play again."

"Yes, I promised Akane-chan I’d do that."

Since they could not see Kichijouji to the front door, the sisters conducted their goodbye rituals in the dining room (dining hall suited the room better).

Akane had been tedious about reminding him about the matter of home tutoring until Kichijouji’s words and the false gaiety of Midori’s mood sent her into the kitchen.

"It was awful of me to force you to stay so late."

"Don’t worry about it. It’s summer vacation."

Kichijouji laughed and shook his head at Masaki who was worn out by the thanking.

"At any rate, I’d have been alone if I’d gone back to the dorm — it was fun."

"Really, I’m relieved to hear you say that."

Masaki knew that even though it was summer vacation, Kichijouji had his hands full with the reports for both the Thesis Competition and the research institute’s reports, so he didn’t have much free time. Despite knowing that, Masaki had still invited Kichijouji. Actually, the statement of ‘it was fun’ had eased Masaki’s mind greatly.

"I’ll come again on Saturday."

"…It’s okay to not worry about what Akane said."

"There no way I could possibly do that."

As he watched his friend’s apparent rivalry with his younger sister, a snigger nearly leaked out against his better judgment.

"I won’t be just coming to be Akane-chan’s home tutor, I have to serve as your opponent for simulation games, Masaki."

Masaki’s lips formed in to a "へ" syllable, as memories of the beginning and end of today’s simulation game overwhelmed him. Kichijouji knew that just from watching him. Therefore, as it’s said, Kichijouji didn’t do anything else to drive Masaki into a corner and they proceeded in that fashion.

"Hey, George, I’ve been thinking a little."

Nevertheless, it was called to a halt from Masaki’s side.

"What’s up, something important?"

"No, not all that important matter, but..."

While he introduced it like that, Masaki’s face did not have any trace of levity in it.

"Concerning that conversation, the problem of situational judgment."

"Hmm, that problem."

"Whether to advance, to retreat, or to maintain the course… the discussion was about instant decision making on a single combat level; I don’t see how strategic simulation games have much to do with that."

"That’s not true. It’s important to develop what’s called an eye for opportunities, and squad combat and single combat are not all that different in the essentials."

"Even if you say so, instant judgment is a reflexive and intuitive thing, right? In order to cultivate a tactical eye for single combat, I still believe the best way is to partake in a multitude of mock combat…"

"Masaki… the loss in Monolith Code to First High School was somewhat due to the single combat tactics within the framework of the overall strategy. Polishing a squad level tactical eye is absolutely indispensable."

"But for squad tactics, isn’t getting the opinion of a competent staff officer more important?"

"Ahh… it’s true about staff officers, but..."

Taking Kichijouji’s hesitation as assent, Masaki mysteriously sported a bright, shiny sparkling smile.

"Then there’s no problem. Because I have George to be a competent staff officer for me."

This surprise attack inflicted great damage on Kichijouji.

To Kichijouji, Masaki’s statement was an excessively sweet blow.

Kichijouji needed tremendous strength of will to stiffen his face and keep his smile from falling off.

"…Flattery won’t work, Masaki. Making decisions on the strategic ideas the staff officers offer is the duty of the general to whom they report to."

Masaki's furious mutters as they parted informed him that there was no way he was being flattered but Kichijouji pivoted and showed Masaki his back.

The muscles in his face were just about to reach their limit.

Luckily, Masaki had not been aware of the state he was in.

If he had been aware of it then, he would not mistake it for anything but something awkward he hadn’t considered.

(Masaki, for you I will become the greatest staff officer. I will always be only your staff officer. So become the greatest general for me.)

The rival he had always been continually conscious of since the Nine Schools Competition, and the fact that Masaki’s romantic interest was that person’s younger sister as well, all disappeared from within his head. Kichijouji just felt happy about being needed by Masaki whom he saw as his benefactor.

# *Memories of Summer*

[August 31st (1)]

It is the year 2095 AD, August 31st. For the students of magic high schools, today is the last day of summer break. As the majority of science and literary high schools have already begun the new school year, and arts and physical education high schools don't start until mid September, it's an about average length. The Nine Schools Competition which ran from August 3rd to the 12th has already finished, but there is no particular break extension for the representatives.

Even in the 21st century long breaks had inherent problems (homework) to go along with them, something often cried over during the last day of break-- this often as not being literal crying whilst looking over essay files comprised solely of a bunch of titles, a cherished tradition across the nation. However, it has to be said that not all students are such slackers(?). Like a certain pair of brother and sister enrolled in first year of the National Magic University attached First high school, the number of students who leisurely spent their last day of summer break relaxing at home was not in the minority.

"Miyuki, it's done."

"Thank you very much, I'm so sorry, Onii-sama. Bothering you with such a trivial matter....."

"Making crushed ice isn't really anything troublesome."

While placing the ice pick onto the dining table, Tatsuya let out a chuckle at his sister's excessive manner of speaking.

At that, Miyuki gave a graceful smile. In her hands, black liquid sloshed around within the heat resistance glass of the coffee server.

Coffee poured in a dark cascade over the chunks of clear ice Miyuki had used magic to create (by freezing from the bottom of the

container upwards, in such a way as to disrupt convection), and Tatsuya had used an ice pick to break it into crushed ice (since if he had used his own magic, it would have ended up as fluffy shaved ice instead).

A fragrant aroma filled the dining room.

To prevent the scent from spreading any further Miyuki cast a pocket of cold air over the large round cup, and soon rose holding a tray with two portions of iced coffee.

At that casual use of a high level skill, Tatsuya narrowed his eyes.

Noticing her brother's gaze Miyuki broke into an embarrassed grin, before airily turning her back.

In the room on the first floor facing the garden-- it had originally been a guest room, but now with the bed removed it had become a spare room-- and lazing around the table, with the thrown open windows and curtains giving the air of an open terrace in a resort, Tatsuya and Miyuki enjoyed coffee time.

That being said Miyuki was bustling around serving Tatsuya hand and foot, such that she didn't even have time to warm her own chair, but as that was because Miyuki found doing so pleasurable, any third person quibbling over the scene would simply be unseemly.

As if finally satisfied, Miyuki modestly took off her white frilly apron and sat down not opposite to Tatsuya from the round table, but next to him.

Beneath the apron, her flawless white arms showed under the wide shoulder straps of her translucent one piece. Tatsuya felt the clear polkadot summer dress was rather familiar.

"Do you remember?"

Sensitively reading Tatsuya's look, Miyuki shyly asked him a question before he could open his mouth.

"Of course. It suits you perfectly."

At Tatsuya's utterly earnest compliment, Miyuki began to blush.

"Sheesh. Onii-sama, you're always like that."

"It's because I truly think so. I said it at the start right? Besides, I wouldn't give you anything that didn't match you."

Accompanied by a cool face, at Tatsuya's intense words, completely unsuitable for (in light of the general world view) his sister, Miyuki's face turned completely crimson.

"Eh, uhm..... Thank you very much."

As he caught a glimpse of Miyuki's face looking up at him, both embarrassed yet happy at the same time, she had a rather similar expression when I first brought her that dress Tatsuya thought as he relived the memories of that day.

[August 14th (1)]

August 14th. Two days after the close of the Nine Schools Competition. Tatsuya and Miyuki were going to the shopping tower in the city center.

The two of them are high school students, and in the middle of their summer break. Even for shopping it would seem unlikely to need to go on a Sunday, but of course there was a reason. From tomorrow the 15th to the 18th, Tatsuya has to attend meetings at Four Leaves Technology (FLT) regarding commercialization of the flight device. Next week from Tuesday to Thursday he has field exercises scheduled with the Independent Magic Equipped Battalion. Since his only free time is in the weekend, Tatsuya thought there was little point in taking a break.

As for what to do to fill in the time, Tatsuya decided to buy Miyuki a reward for her victory in the Mirage Bat event. At the word 'reward' instead of 'present' Miyuki had sulked lightly for a while, but as this

was ostensibly a present in all but name anyway she was now happily walking beside him in the best of spirits. In any case, the subtle fact that Miyuki was not pleased with a simple gift, but more than happy to receive a gift from Tatsuya was something lost upon him.

Miyuki's outfit today was a dark blouse with see-through sleeves, an ankle length white skirt, and sandals. On her head was a wide-brimmed straw hat. It was a private outing so he didn't mind all the exposed skin, but as usual, Miyuki's fashion was conservative compared to what she wore inside the house.

On the other hand Tatsuya wore a jacket loosely over a T-shirt, with elastic synthetic pants on the bottom. While the pants looked tight, it was a summer fabric with excellent breathability and despite covering all the way to the ankles, he didn't seem hot at all. However, with the exception that up to his neck and wrists were covered he wasn't that different from his sister.

A woman's love for shopping has not changed even now, something which could even be construed as common sense, and especially among young ladies that love is something which has not diminished as the last decade of the 21st century draws to a close. It is thought that the shopping habits of these girls can be divided into three patterns.

Firstly, those who buy their favorite things first.

Secondly, those who buy their favorite things last.

Thirdly, and probably most commonly, those who while having a favorite proceed to go here and there, back and forth all over the place.

Miyuki belongs to the first category. When Tatsuya had asked her yesterday 'what do you want' Miyuki had hesitated only slightly before replying 'a summer one piece dress', probably as a result of the summer dress Mayumi had showed off on the bus back from the Nine Schools Competition. In a short while, Tatsuya presumed they had arrived at their destination. This was because within the fashion

boutique Miyuki was currently pulling him into, a wide array of similar dresses were prominently being displayed. Miyuki's current outfit was a relatively trendy design, but it's fine for her to try new things now and again, Tatsuya thought as he glanced at the mannequins in their skimpy summer dresses.

Looking at the same thing as Tatsuya, Miyuki's expression faltered. Well, not exactly the same thing. What Miyuki had seen was the price tag attached to those summer dresses.

"You don't have to hold back, Miyuki. You know my income."

Although it's called a price tag it's considerably different from the century before, being an AR display virtual tag.

In order to check the price it's necessary to use the information terminal everyone carries around and access the AR app, which is how Tatsuya knew what Miyuki had been looking at.

Tatsuya too had engaged the AR app and checked the tag. The price marked did not deviate from his expectations.

This was a shop which had caught Miyuki's eye. There should be no budget stuff in it.

What's more, Tatsuya's words to Miyuki weren't bravado. Expensive as they were, these were ready-to-wears designed for young teens. For haute couture, it's not even a very high price. As a member of Taurus Silver, this amount of money wasn't much to him at all.

The act of dangling their purse before someone would usually elicit an unfavorable response from most people, but Miyuki simply brushed it aside. She probably thought that refraining now would simply be rude to her brother. Abandoning her hesitation, Miyuki began to look over the dresses on the mannequins and hangers.

Having the physical articles in a store instead of simple 3D video displays marks this shop as the real deal. Low price retailers, and even mid range stores, have 3D displays as the norm.

Most of the time even fitting is done via composite video. Being unable to ascertain the feel of the fabric is covered by a returns policy. Being able to try on the sample products, like here, is pretty rare for a shop nowadays.

After looking around all four corners of the shop, Miyuki called out to a clerk and pointed to three dresses. After telling her she wanted to try them on, the clerk nodded with a grin. The reason it wasn't a mere business smile was probably because they wanted to use Miyuki as PR for the shop, Tatsuya thought idly.

It wasn't uncommon for Miyuki to cause such ulterior motives. It was also unacceptable. For example even if they wanted to make just an area limited ad, he wouldn't let Miyuki model. The true reason was simply that Tatsuya did not want to expose Miyuki to countless dirty looks.

But as expected (relatively) of such a high class establishment, the clerk wasn't rude enough to bring the matter up all of a sudden. Rather she left for the stock room smiling all the while, returning swiftly with samples for fitting. Although they're samples there are mechanisms which automatically clean and sterilize the articles each time, so there was no hesitation in taking them. Holding the samples, Miyuki was guided by the clerk to the dressing rooms.

Meanwhile, Tatsuya sat down on a bench inside the shop. If something came up the clerk would come calling, and even if not should something happen to Miyuki he would know immediately. To kill time, he opened a publication website. However, he never got the chance to pick up the strings of text displayed on the mobile terminal. The reason was the moment he opened the site the clerk from earlier was standing obliquely before him, as if trying to read his expression.

"Is something the matter?"

He would have been content to wait until the other party began talking, but as he had assumed the pose of one waiting for his partner (well more precisely, his companion), it would be difficult for the

clerk whose hospitality manners had been so firmly ingrained to do so. Thinking that, Tatsuya had therefore decided to lead her on.

"I have a little matter I'd like to talk with you about....."

"Should we move somewhere else?"

This is probably something confidential, Tatsuya had thought, although going that far did seem a bit much.

"No, this will just take a bit of time."

At Tatsuya's slight nod of acceptance, the subtle tension in the clerk's face came away.

"If you don't mind, about the dress your companion is purchasing."

"We haven't decided if we're going to buy it yet, but go on."

At Tatsuya's curt interruption of her dialogue, the clerk gave a hasty nod.

"Certainly! This is all considering if you would like to purchase the goods from our shop."

"Of course, if my sister likes it then we'll buy it."

"Thank you very much!"

Tatsuya wasn't really intentionally trying to harass the clerk. As a matter of course he had all manner of comebacks prepared and ready, but at the clerk's overreaction it was Tatsuya who felt troubled. He may have had some more things to say, but at this point it didn't matter.

"So, what is it you were saying?"

The one who interrupted had been Tatsuya, but now he gently urged her on.

"Oh, right."

The clerk didn't show a single hint of discomfort. The results from the training boutique employees receive is formidable indeed. Or maybe

she was simply completely at a loss when it came to dealing with him.

"If the articles instore are to your fancy, would it be possible for the clothing in question to be worn from the outset?"

In any case, the fact the clerk came for "consultation" was somewhat strange at first glance. In itself, the contents of the request weren't unusual. A ready-to-wear, and easy to maintain sleeveless one piece summer dress. Wearing that straight from the shop, especially considering the shop has the articles physically in the stockroom, is not uncommon. What was strange was that the clerk had specifically asked about it.

"You want us to wear the dress from here around, is that what you mean?"

However, Tatsuya didn't ask the reason. The clerk's, or rather the boutique's intention was pretty clear. They probably wanted Miyuki walking around in the clothing from this shop as a kind of moving advert.

"Yes. In return, we will recalculate the price for you."

The clerk also seemed to have realized Tatsuya had deduced their purpose. Quickly bringing in the matter of a discount, this woman had a formidable mercantile streak belying her youth.

Tatsuya had no interest in the discount itself. However, he was concerned in another aspect of the clerk's request.

"Is that it? Shoots are NG[4]."

"Of course. We will not engage in any activity which may infringe on the customer's privacy."

"Could you show us clothing instore besides the ones on display?"

"With pleasure."

Not bad, Tatsuya thought.

After the negotiations with the clerk were settled, a different clerk came over. It seemed Miyuki wanted him. Without a hint of irritation, he stood up. This was to be expected after all, and even if not there was nothing to resent.

"Onii-sama, what do you think.....?"

The fitting room door was open. With a three way mirror in the background allowing viewing of all sides (to prevent voyeurism, no cameras were allowed inside), Miyuki shyly asked his opinion. She was wearing a pale grey toned jumper skirt.

"It suits you extremely well. Still, I think you can go with something a bit more dashing."

The knee-length simple design greatly complimented Miyuki's beauty, but it's a bit too drab, Tatsuya thought.

"Is that so?... Then, please wait a bit."

She nodded and closed the door. The faint sound of rustling clothes could be heard. The moments of silence were probably her working on her hair and skirt.

"Sorry for the wait. How about this?"

Seeming far more embarrassed than shy this time, Miyuki solicited his opinion whilst avoiding making eye contact.

It's probably because it's so different from the clothes she normally wears outside that she's unnecessarily self conscious he thought.

Miyuki's outfit this time was a checkered camisole one piece. From the neck to the shoulders was totally bare. The skirt also rose tantalizingly above the knee in excess of five centimeters, such that even innocents would be caught and enraptured.

"Yeah, that's great. I can't take my eyes off you."

"That's....."

At Tatsuya's straightforward opinion Miyuki turned scarlet. That being said the considerably older clerk was blushing even more furiously, though whether it was at Miyuki's stunning figure or Tatsuya's far too honest words was unknown.

"There was one more right? Did it not interest you?"

"No..... Then, shall I show you that one as well?"

The process of changing clothes was repeated.

The summer dress this time was pretty much exactly halfway between the first and the second in terms of exposure level. It was a silhouette which focused on the waist while emphasizing the bust line and hips.

"Um..... How is it.....?"

Despite having less exposure than the second dress, the sex appeal in this one here was top notch. She must have realized that while putting it on, which probably accounted for the extent of her embarrassment.

It was a design which would be awkward if there was insufficient volume around the chest and hips, but it fitted her surprisingly well. As the one who saw her in her underclothes on a weekly basis during her CAD adjustment Tatsuya should have been perfectly aware of his sister's growing body, but seeing it objectively like this really drove home the point that she was drawing closer to being an adult than he had ever thought. It exuded a totally different, probably age specific, unbalanced charm from the previous camisole dress.

"This is rather troubling. Even I might lose my reasoning with this."

"....."

At Tatsuya's unapologetic compliment, the color of Miyuki's face deepened even further, and she closed the door of the fitting room in silence.

After that Miyuki's fitting (or in other words, fashion show) continued. Each and every time Tatsuya praised his sister straightforwardly as if unaware of what shame was, and for her part

Miyuki was exceedingly embarrassed each time (almost as if making up for her brother). Still she requested to be able to try on even more outfits, seeming to value her brother's praise far more highly than the well-being of either her heart or facial blood vessels, so that was that.

Miyuki had no modelling experience. Although she had looks which would have given any international top model a run for their money, she had no professional modelling skill. She couldn't manage rapid clothes changing or anything like that.

In short when all's said, this repeated fitting alone took a considerable amount of time. Of course when the fitting room door was shut it was impossible to peek inside, but when Miyuki came out to show off a costume to Tatsuya, they were visible from the store's exhibition space. Occasionally Tatsuya would request her to spin around or strike a pose, and a crowd began to form around the dressing room.

Still, it's not like they senselessly crowded around gawking. Tatsuya would never have permitted that, and the clerks in all likelihood tactfully did their work before he had to make a move. Instead, the youths were simply glimpsed in the surroundings from a distance. Still however much they shuffled around and pretended to look at the mannequins, they just couldn't seem to avert their eyes.

The word youths did not simply imply young men. Although there were guys in their number, numerically speaking the girls were superior. Well, honestly speaking the very nature of the shop meant that there was a high entry threshold for guys. In fact, the males were in the minority outnumbered three to one and comprised mainly of college students with their girlfriends or those dressed as young businessmen; Tatsuya was probably the only high school student on the premises. Although there weren't many with the insight to see that he was actually a high school student anyway.

One of the girls, or rather the girls in the group one by one would look at Miyuki with a mixture of admiration and envy before quickly looking away. At the sound of the dressing room door closing sighs

of relief could be heard, then upon the sound of it opening again as if charmed they'd hide then peek out for a glimpse.

On that note, the female customers being escorted by a guy-- or rather being waited upon-- kept a better state of mind. As their boyfriends stared at Miyuki with worshipful eyes (showing there wasn't a single unconditional lover among them) they either stamped them on the foot or nudged them in the ribs or the like. On the one hand they would enviously look upon Tatsuya who was shamelessly and unhesitatingly heaping Miyuki with praise, then unreasonably take their anger out on their hapless lovers. In short, they restored their emotional balance by using the next convenient guy as a doormat.

Of course, both Tatsuya and Miyuki were fully aware of all the attention they were getting. He was mentally sorting out the harmful and harmless gazes, automatically categorizing them without even being aware and especially putting the non hostile intents out of mind, while she naturally filtered out all the looks-- she would never even be able to walk down the street normally otherwise-- so it never got to the extent they had to suspend shopping.

Nothing but words of approval came out from Tatsuya's mouth, yet each time was different. Monopolizing Tatsuya's complete attention Miyuki's feeling of happiness was almost intoxicating, such that she wasn't able to differentiate the subtle nuances in his words. As the number of tried on dresses passed 20, Miyuki ended up holding a polka-dot dress that had been kept in the fitting room. It was a sleeveless, knee-length camisole summer dress. The wide shoulder straps were frilled with lace, and around the chest and hem of the skirt plenty of lace was in abundance too. It combined a generous amount of exposure with an air of elegance, the iridescent ivory polka-dots lending a very age appropriate cuteness.

"Onii-sama, I was thinking this one.....?"

"I reckon that's the best as well. It really is cute."



She had picked this dress because it was the one that had been most popular with her brother, but upon hearing him saying 'cute' again, she made up her mind in an instant.

"Then..... Could I get this please?"

Miyuki didn't bother with hesitant language this late in the game. Instead, she gave a heartachingly beautiful smile-- with utmost sincerity, a look suitable for receiving a gift from her brother-- and asked his permission.

"Sure."

For his part, Tatsuya didn't really have a say in the matter-- he would never have been able to say 'no'. Being able to buy these things his sister liked was the most meaningful use of his income anyway, he had always thought. Whether he himself was aware of that thought was a moot point.

At Miyuki's lovely 'please', the consciousness of the watching men seemed to freeze.

At the same time the women gave a collective sigh of envy at Tatsuya's natural generosity.

"Then this dress and, along with dresses number two and seventeen please. She'll be wearing this back, so could you please send my sister's current clothes back along with the other items?"

"Certainly. Please come back again anytime. Thank you for waiting."

Then to these unexpected VIP customers, the clerk gave a solemn nod.

[August 31st (2)]

"Still, I never thought we'd end up buying three. Even if the price was very reasonable."

Miyuki must also have been reminiscing about that time. She had a happy grin on her face, as she spoke to Tatsuya in a teasing tone.

"I would have been more than happy with just this one. Onii-sama? Is this what they call 'adult's shopping'?"

"It would have been a shame to let your 21 tryouts go to waste. It was finally our long awaited summer vacation, but I was only able to take you out shopping in the end. Or, was it unnecessary trouble for you?"

"Not at all!"

Miyuki line was simply teasingly accusing her brother of 'splurging', yet at this frontal attack, she hastily raised the white flag.

"That, I..... Was very happy."

She had been taken down a peg by Tatsuya, but Miyuki wasn't distressed at all. Rather she shyly looked up at her brother's face, and as she did so, the distance between them diminished even more than earlier.

"It really was a long awaited opportunity huh..... To be honest there were other things like yukata and various other summer activities I would have liked to leisurely do with you, but."

Tatsuya's face, which had been smiling in satisfaction at Miyuki's good mood, suddenly clouded as he muttered in a bitter voice.

".....It wasn't Onii-sama's fault."

Miyuki's whisper was tender as she took his hands from the table and gently wrapped them in her own.

[August 14th (2)]

Although they had finished choosing clothes, there was still time to spare before lunch. As she was finally able to come out alone with Tatsuya, Miyuki didn't want to just go home and let the occasion go to waste.

Fortunately, Tatsuya wasn't exactly the indoors type either. In addition, Tatsuya had come out today with family service (sister

service) in mind. Without any particular words between the two, they decided to hang out like this until evening.

The building they were currently in specialized in fashion for young women. They didn't carry just clothes but also shoes, hats, accessories, various knick-knacks, swimsuits and yukatas according to season; this building had such goods for the entirety of it's 14 floors. Even the food stalls were snacks and sweet shops catering to young women. It was a rather formidable atmosphere for men, but another thing altogether for women and couples. Even if his companion was his sister, no one would suspect a thing.

In fact, without listening in to the conversation between them it would be nigh impossible to perceive that they were siblings. Or rather, if one didn't pick up on Miyuki's utterance of 'Onii-sama', even if they were close by they wouldn't be able to tell.

With her arm happily entwined around Tatsuya's, Miyuki's nestled appearance no matter how you looked at it gave the perfect impression of a girl in love. Those with some bias may think they were an 'unbalanced couple'. That line of thought was probably restricted only to the male populace, after which they would be accused by their accompanying lady as 'ogling another woman' and appropriately chastised. Well, it was a kind of expected harmony.

As previously mentioned, this building was pretty much a women only store. It held nothing of interest in particular-- the majority of those with girlfriends or those they wanted to make girlfriends seemed only to be here to make their partner happy-- for men. A man with thoughts like that, putting their own enjoyment aside, could probably spend a considerable amount of time in here, but Tatsuya was not that type to say the least.

However as Tatsuya accompanied Miyuki in her window shopping, he displayed no sign of unwillingness whatsoever. As Miyuki's eyes animatedly brightened or filled with frustration, Tatsuya's own eyes twinkled warmly. Whether inborn or acquired, imprinted by others or nurtured by himself, the fact was as long as Miyuki was there it

wouldn't matter if they were in the city or in the mountains; he would be the same.

It was the one thing he truly wanted. As long as she was beside him, whatever the conditions didn't matter; this was something anyone who knew his circumstances could understand full well. Both Miyuki and Tatsuya depended heavily upon one another, but perhaps more on Tatsuya's side than the other.

Still if you actually asked them, they'd probably just reply 'it's none of your business (not your concern)' in unison. A punishment more painful than being kicked by a horse may also be forthcoming.

That-- the harsh handling-- wouldn't really be due to the blunt question in particular.

It would also apply to the rude intrusion.

Having an early lunch at a pasta house, the siblings glared coldly at the young man at the table next to them.

Tatsuya and Miyuki had entered that shop by coincidence, or rather on a whim. When eating out, the two of them would rarely choose a place with such an unobstructed layout as this. They'd mainly go for places with private rooms, or at least booths with partitions between tables. If they didn't, they'd garner far too much unwelcome attention, most of it naturally on the part of Miyuki.

Due to the occasion today, they probably decided that most of the customers would be women, and the men would most likely be accompanied by women anyway, well, it ended up being quite the piece of wishful thinking.

The moment Miyuki entered the shop, followed by Tatsuya, the bustle inside was frozen in an instant. Even the clerk-- unusually for such a casual establishment as this, a waiter not a waitress-- was paralyzed breathless. Even Tatsuya had not expected such a hypersensitive reaction. He had thought that a place which dealt with fashion on such a regular basis should have at least some resistance to

Miyuki's beauty, but actually, precisely because this was a place which dealt with fashion there were probably few opportunities to see a true beauty of Miyuki's caliber.

The waiter regained his senses just as Tatsuya was on the verge of turning right around and walking back out. He probably sensed Tatsuya's dismay and intent to leave, clearing his mind in the process. Whether professionalism as a waiter or a lack of subtlety, he certainly did at least succeed in keeping two customers.

Even if they were picky, in all likelihood they would meet a similar response in any other establishment. So, Tatsuya quietly followed the waiter as he escorted them to an empty table. For her part, Miyuki would normally shy away from such attention but bore it. As long as Tatsuya was there, such things were trivial matters.

The two seat table did not have fixed sofas (at least apparently), but rather wooden chairs. After requesting the waiter fetch some chairs for them, Tatsuya turned to Miyuki. As he pulled out the chair for her to sit, she looked back at him coyly and gave a curtsy. Seating himself in the chair opposite, Tatsuya glanced at the waiter. In haste, he brought over and offered them menus. Receiving them in relaxed manner, Tatsuya dismissed him.

His conduct was so full of dignity belying his age that the waiter didn't feel any discomfort from the brusque treatment. The gazes of the customers who had been staring at Miyuki were for a fraction of a second diverted to Tatsuya. Most of them were female, but in their minds the sense of discomfort was replaced by a sort of consent. Although they had earlier been silently belittling Miyuki in their minds, thinking things such as 'what an unbalanced pair' and 'her taste in men is terrible', all this changed to 'the perfect couple' as they fully accepted their defeat.

With the rivalry discarded, the jealous looks changed to praise. However the couples, especially within the men, felt an anxious plight similar to jealous suspicion. Few of the 'boyfriends' were able to understand the look in their 'girlfriends' faces, but subconsciously

an instinctive part of them understood that what had stolen their current girlfriend, or future girlfriend's eyes was not just her haunting beauty, but the deep love between her and the boy sitting opposite her.

A new player came upon the stage immediately after Tatsuya had finished placing orders for the two of them.

She was a superb beauty.

Her age was around 20. She was in the flower of her youth, her regal color and luster like an overpowering bouquet of roses.

Whatever the time or place, hers was a beauty which would not fail to catch attention.

She herself understood that perfectly well, and one who was fully showing off.

Her pompous carriage however did not elicit disagreeable reactions from those watching. In all likelihood she had polished her image, as well as her consciousness of being seen. She carried it as if it were her career.

Behind her, as if chamberlain to her empress, a probably considerably older young man tagged along. She was possibly an entertainer-- that being an actress. In the year 2095 realistic 3DCGs had pretty much completely replaced the role of 'idols', but the role of 'actress' was still the realm of living women.

She had an aura which would be fearless even if introduced as a lead actress.

It could only be guessed at why she would come into such a casual restaurant. Maybe it was just on a whim, or she was looking over a location. The one thing that could be said for certain was if she set foot in this place filled with 'ordinary' people, she would have certainly drawn the eyes of everyone instore.

She herself had fully expected that. It didn't stem from any vanity or self-esteem. It was simply based on experience repeated dozens of times that it was almost a rule. As if second nature to her already, she directed her charm and prepared to be stared at.

However, her expectations this time were off the mark. As per the golden rule 'no rule is without exceptions', her string of experiences, was met with an exception.

The clerk who greeted her showed a sense of surprise and admiration, but it was a far calmer reaction than she would have thought.

For a mere waiter to appear before her and keep his cool, in her experience took considerable courage. However in the 80% full shop, a small murmur buzzed in the vicinity of the two as intrigued eyes and heads turned towards them with surprise as men and women alike recognized her beauty, then as if losing interest immediately turned back to watch something inside the store.

Appearances aside, she was an actress. For the five years since her debut, she had built up a strong position as an entertainer. If one is insensitive, they cannot survive in that industry. CG technology improves by the year, and glamour was no longer the absolute advantage it once was. It was not just her beauty, but her extraordinarily acute sensitivity and forceful acting beyond her years which had gained her stardom.

However normal sensitivity, never mind acute sensitivity would have sufficed to reach the same conclusion. She realized that there was something in this shop which was attracting more attention.

To her this was not something interesting. Rather, you could say it was unpleasant. She couldn't help dreading to think just what kind of person was here who would attract more attention than herself.

However, her pride as a star could not allow to let this incident wherein the public simply looked (or rather 'flicked a glance') at the two of them go. As she was guided by the wait staff, she simply tried

to avoid looking in the direction where all the other customers were staring.

However, whether by chance or design, the table the two of them were led to was immediately diagonally across to the table which was drawing everyone's eye. Seating herself, she made herself steal a glance with forced casualness. A young couple was sitting there. The boy who was facing her, while not bad looking, didn't seem like the type which would magnetically attract the ladies. That being the case, the focus of attention of everyone had to be the girl whose back was to her.

--Though even as she thought, she put on a brave face. The fact she did so meant the girl was definitely not normal. In truth, she had known that the moment she caught a glimpse of her profile slightly. Perhaps she was forced to understand even from behind. The fact that this girl was extraordinary.

It was a sensation she had never felt before. In words, it would be something akin to desperate jealousy. She didn't exactly think of herself as someone chosen by the gods. The position she proudly had now, without meditating over the providence of her being born with good looks, was attained through living towards a more polished appearance, studying beautification and greedily learning all she could about acting.

But this girl was different. Whether she was loved by God or had made a deal with the Devil, it was evident she was special. She was in a dimension unreachable by mere effort.

She felt that was unreasonable. For her to enrapture the attention of all without any effort, made her who had desperately strove all her life feel like a fool. A deep desire to prove again that stardom was not dependent on born appearances swelled within her.

She beckoned to the young man sitting opposite her, who leaned over, and whispered in his ear.

While facing that beckoning beauty, the man's thoughts were on another woman.

Or rather, another young lady.

Diagonally behind him, was seated a girl whose beauty the likes of which he had never seen. It fully occupied his mind.

To him, the beautiful woman was just a commodity, an accessory. He was the third generation president of a top talent agency, was in control of many popular actresses and countless more budding (unhatched) ones. It was to him something only natural, without a hint of guilt. This woman before him was a star now, but back when she was just a pretty face it was all because of his taking care of her from an early age that she had risen to her position, he thought. He also did feel that such congratulatory thoughts were pretty just really considering all the effort he had gone through, and he thought that it was not just him but also her who agreed and was appropriately grateful.

He had brought her along to this folksy establishment because he wanted to show her off and see the envy in everyone's faces. An accessory is meaningless unless shown off. He was aware that it was a rather perverse interest, but he decided that being a professional performing artist was a perverse occupation from the beginning. To him who did not know the hardships of the age of war, the entertainment winter his predecessors had gone through, the chair of the president of production was just a means to quickly and easily satisfy his ephemeral vanity.

This woman who he had brought with him today was the accessory that most attracted his interest for now. She wasn't one of the top earners for the office, but she was the best looking among them. Now that she had joined the ranks of the top actresses after a fashion, he could no longer parade her around as much as when she was more anonymous but that simply increased the sense of superiority he felt. From the perspective of most people the woman was the dominant

one and the man just an adjunction, but that was probably too much for the bullheaded man himself to realize.

To him, the woman was like a large diamond polished and cut by a craftsman. He purchased the roughs, then in the hands of a craftsman they were worked upon. That was the work of production, with the resulting gem being called an actress. To be sure she had earnestly worked hard to polish herself, as an example even if a craftsman processed his gems well without a fine band of gold around it wasn't on the level it could be sold.

At the first glance he immediately knew that the girl over there was not something money could buy. If the woman in front of him was a large diamond worth several tens of million yen, then the girl was as the priceless 'Great Star of Africa'[5]; such was the difference between them. By happy circumstance judging from his attitude the one she was with was just a boy, and he felt the eager urge to add her to his collection as soon as possible. But he was accompanied by an actress from the office today. In any other case, he would have realized how bad the appearance of wanting to turn her into a money making machine would hurt his case, and recalculated accordingly.

Which was why having the actress along and being able to say the woman before him wanted to scout the girl for a new movie was a godsend. He pretended to deliberate a while, then stood up as if going along with the will of the selfish actress.

The previously cute gaze (in the dull childish way of thinking) suddenly turned hostile. Tatsuya felt the change. He had so far ignored it because they did not seem likely to cause Miyuki harm, but it had turned rather troublesome. As he thought so, the source of the problem across from him (for Miyuki it was to the back diagonally) stood up from his table and walked over to them.

Both Tatsuya and Miyuki directed an unpleasant look at the young man standing next to their table. Glances were one thing, but it was

no wonder they were uncomfortable with being stared at from point blank range by a stranger.

"Sorry to disturb you."

He had a rather blunt way of speaking. He seemed to be hedging his words to some extent, but still came across as far too familiar.

Tatsuya lost his intent to respond amiably to this man.

Miyuki's eyes were pregnant with a frosty light, and naturally turned away from him.

Despite this apparently rejecting attitude, the young man took out his cardcase and held out a business card to Miyuki with a fake smile.

"This is who I am."

Instead of a built-in chip, it was an old fashioned card made from paper. There was no micro-pattern or anything printed, just a character based truly classic cheap card. Miyuki reluctantly took it, then with a glance passed it on with strain to Tatsuya.

The surname and the name of his company were written with the same characters, and before his name the title President was attached. Behind the company name was the word 'productions'. Probably to do with professional entertainment Tatsuya thought.

"You, got any interest in movies?"

Miyuki's eyes avoided him.

"I have a role that'd be just right for you!"

Miyuki's curt attitude should have spoken volumes, but the man would not be discouraged.

"Hey, won't you tell me your name?"

At that the young president brought his face so close that Miyuki cowered down. He completely ignored the clear air of rejection she was giving off. Such thick nerve and mental toughness was fitting for

a salesman like him, and that unrelenting determination really was rather impressive.

Of course, what would be remembered would be the far more overpowering discomfort, but still.

Finally, Miyuki turned her gaze on the man she had been avoiding up to now.

That didn't mean her attitude had swayed one bit.

Within her eyes was a frozen light. Her hard look seemed to accuse the man for his lack of courtesy.

Shown that face, the young man momentarily faltered but almost immediately righted himself, well almost. With an even falser smile than before, he actually reached out his hand to Miyuki.

That was probably due to his obstinacy as a man in professional performing arts. To him, a production president who considered beautiful women and girls as commodities, to seem to have lost a mental battle with an amateur was probably a blow to his pride.

In any case it was short-sighted behavior. As a young man who had inherited status, he seemed to have gained the bad habit of being unable to control his feelings when it came to people in weaker positions than him.

Was he going for her hand, or her face?

It didn't really matter, as there was no way Tatsuya would ever allow such outrageous behavior.

The young man's arm, as it reached for Miyuki, was suddenly firmly in the grasp of Tatsuya's hand before he knew it.

"Wha--!"

The man's selfish protest changed to a scream in the middle, before stopping short. The pain he was experiencing was so intense it didn't even allow him to let out a sound.

"Let's leave it at this."

Tatsuya's words probably didn't even reach the man's consciousness. His fingers twisting the man's hand were also pressing with severe strength and angle into pressure points in the man's wrist, like the points in Chinese medicinal acupuncture, such that the man's mind whited out from the pain.

As Tatsuya released his hand the man staggered back two, three steps before collapsing. Tatsuya's cold face as he looked over the youth was entirely devoid of expression. A shiver ran down the man's spine that eclipsed even the pain. If he had been laughed at, the pride within him could have been fanned to flame. Even if it was something small and ephemeral like a sparkler. But Tatsuya's emotionless gaze, simply telling him 'get out of my way', brooked no hope of resistance.

With his eyes locked on to Tatsuya's-- he couldn't look anywhere else-- the youth stood up and hobbled away. Truth be told, to have experienced such crushing pain and hesitate to even think about retaliation before retreating was a testament to the man's courage. It was not inconceivable a weaker man may even have had incontinence.

However the woman accompanying the man certainly didn't think so. At the sound of a chair scraping the floor, the beauty haughtily and proudly left the shop with the echo of her heeled sandals resonating through the store. She didn't so much as glance at the man.

Finally, staff arrived. Two waiters approached at a quick pace, their footsteps worried. They didn't go to Tatsuya, but rather to the man.

Politely, in such a low tone that only the listener could hear, the waiters had some words with the now red faced man. His frenzied retorts, those which could be discerned from the loud ranting, seemed to comprise senseless things like "just who do you think I am!?" and "don't think you can talk to me like that!" among the parts where he raised his voice, but Tatsuya didn't give it a second thought. Although nothing physical occurred after, with a waiter pressing on him from

both the left and right, after the mounting psychological pressure built up and made the man leave the shop, Tatsuya returned to his seat.

As he sat down, a man of around 40 dressed in white chef clothes came to their table. Introducing himself as both the chef and owner of the establishment, the man bowed deeply to both Tatsuya and Miyuki.

"I am very sorry for that uncomfortable episode just now."

"No, we're the ones who caused a disturbance. We apologize for the inconvenience."

Although still just 16, Tatsuya had spent much time around adults. If the other party was civil, he would be able to respond with as much equanimity as any.

The shopkeeper's eyes thawed slightly towards Tatsuya's cool demeanor, probably because he felt the calmness beyond his years.

"Don't mind the commotion. The one at fault was the other party. You were just involved."

Even at the close of the 21st century, the bad habit of insisting that 'in a quarrel both parties are to blame' remained ingrained into society, but this shopkeeper seemed to be the type who did not agree with that poor custom of dancing around accountability.

"Thank you for that."

Tatsuya approved of this attitude which could clearly distinguish between black and white. Without the need to put on any exterior show, he returned the bow naturally.

"The clerk was delayed and it ended up causing such a problem for you two, but please feel free to continue your meal if you would like to do so. Of course, it'll be on the house."

Before Tatsuya could object, the shopkeeper went back to the kitchen. Despite the casual appearance of the store, the food was of an extremely satisfactory level. Both the appetizer of soup and the

following mains pasta were as straight laced as the stubborn character of their chef, well worked together with no pretensions, and both Tatsuya and Miyuki enjoyed them immensely.

After that was dessert. This was especially enrapturing for Miyuki. It was a thin size four (12 cm diameter) ice cake. The rich smell of vanilla wafted from the mutely colored topping, and it was just as authentic and unpretentious as the earlier courses. The not too hard, not too soft cool melt in your mouth texture was just as good as the offerings from any more upscale shops.

What delighted Miyuki was not just the taste however. Among the waiters the one slightly older, presumably the senior, brought along the ice cake with two spoons. The spoons had an unnaturally long handle, and wouldn't have been very practical for eating alone.

Placing those items in the middle of the table, the waiter had spoken to them in a soft voice.

"One for the lovely boyfriend to the beautiful girlfriend. One for the beautiful girlfriend to the lovely boyfriend. For the very compatible two of you, enjoy this sweet moment."

Due to the character of the place, those were probably words specifically scripted for such a situation as this.

Still Miyuki happily accepted it, smiling giddily with her face dyed red, and held out the spoon with a scoop of ice cream in it to Tatsuya.

--after concluding this shameless play disguised as dessert, as promised no specific bill came, so Tatsuya instead of taking out his electronic wallet simply repeatedly pressed a disposable money chip into the waiter's hand before quickly leaving the shop.

Lunch had finished on an unexpectedly interesting (and possibly just a bit embarrassing) note, but unfortunately life was not so kind as to end everything so cleanly.

Before the siblings stood the young president of the performing arts company from the restaurant earlier. There was no sign of the woman. She had probably left him and gone back. Instead, he was accompanied by four inversely proportioned (that is to say physically overbearing but far inferior in looks) men.

"You caused me quite the bit of humiliation earlier."

Although his voice was level for the time being, not the outraged ranting of before, it was possible to catch just a hint of crankiness in it.

This guy really is going full throttle spouting out all these cliched lines Tatsuya thought to himself, but he wasn't about to throw in the towel this late into the game.

"I believe I said so earlier. Let's leave it at that."

But as he had no intention of purposely picking a fight, he kept his words somewhat peaceful. At least he didn't say something like 'it's no surprise your companion ran from you considering your tiny mind', but he didn't hide the contempt in his tone either. He didn't intend to start a fight, but it almost seemed like he wouldn't mind welcoming one either.

If that was the case, Tatsuya's words were super effective.

"......If you want to prostrate yourself and apologize, now's the time."

"You're going to cause a scene right here?"

His words and attitude were fairly easy to grasp, but did he really intend to try something with so many people around? Tatsuya had said this out of concern for the man's social standing, but

"Shut up. Since when are real people subservient to you witches?"

Those words were enough to clear Tatsuya's hesitation and restraint.

He shifted his body, completely hiding Miyuki from view. All traces of expression disappeared from his face, and his eyes narrowed.

Perhaps mistaking the change which had come over Tatsuya, the young man smiled.

"I had thought I remembered seeing you somewhere. We had met in the Nine Schools something hadn't we? I had thought I'd found a huge gemstone, but it turned out to be just a fake imitation."

Perhaps this man cleaved to the hoax that magicians were genetically modified and produced androids. Although their numbers were much reduced, Tatsuya knew through observation and knowledge that some still stubbornly persisted, which was why he didn't recall a sense of surprise at his words.

"That's a lie."

The man's words were rather barefaced.

"You've only just met my sister today. Even if you had caught a glimpse of her during the Nine Schools Competition, even through video, there's no way a man of your type could ever hope to stand before her."

A wintry air began to permeate. It did not hold the chill of snow or ice, but cold hardness of a razor sharp steel blade

"What the hell. You a siscon or something?"

Subconsciously the man opened his mouth wide and laughed out loud. --his face almost turned blue. His voice trembled.

Tatsuya didn't bother to retort to that, but rather came right back with a line of his own.

"Is that something you had to learn from your buddies over there?"

The cowardly dog barks the loudest, and besides Tatsuya wasn't so delicate as to be provoked by such words. Still, that didn't mean he had to be tolerant of such dogs.

"It'd be better for you to leave before you do something unfortunate in public. Or should I say it again so you can understand better?"

The one who had been insulted was not himself, but Miyuki. That was the sole reason Tatsuya had dispensed with all peaceful intent.

Keeping his eyes on the man, Tatsuya took a step forward. The man's entourage visibly tensed. They didn't have the same finesses or training as professional bodyguards, but they were experienced in their own way. On the level of street fighting anyway. You'd never guess from their attire, but Tatsuya idly guessed that the four were probably gangsters. The talk of there being good relations between pro entertainment and the underworld were probably not the whole truth, but at least not false either.

"What the hell are you guys all scared for! They can't use magic in cities. It should be a piece of cake!"

It seems the man had been completely taken in by the urban legends surrounding magicians.

Magicians didn't use magic in cities because they were restricted by the law from exercising magic, not because they received remote mechanical signals or the like. In any case magic was only prohibited if there was no legitimate reason and in the event of accidents or disasters the use of magic to help is encouraged, and yet another exception is the case of self defense.

It seemed the henchmen were not so naive as to believe in the myths the president was spouting. Slipping a hand to their waists-- probably a folding pocket knife or something-- they studied Tatsuya's movements with care.

After two steps, Tatsuya stopped and raised both his arms to shoulder height. It wasn't a holdup.

By fluttering and waving his hands, he showed them that they were empty. At that gesture, the gangsters felt they were being made fools of. They knew neither the shape nor utility of CADs, but they did know that magicians used some sort of small device to cast magic. They took Tatsuya's gesture, directed at them, as a declaration that he didn't need magic.

They were correct. Tatsuya was provoking them, as if saying 'I don't need magic to deal with the likes of you.'

The effect was immediate. From the start they were low ranking members, desperate to prove their worth. Being called by the young president, they had been sent out as the small fry. Desire to appeal aside, they had a low boiling point anyway.

Drawing their knives, they lunged at Tatsuya in unison.

Gangs nowadays train their members in group combat as the norm. In this age where both vigilantes and the general public are well organised, groups which are said to be professionals in violence could hardly get away without at least learning to fight as a team.

Two waves of knives attacked from the left and the right.

The screams of young women rent the air.

Miyuki's voice was not among them.

Without a word, without so much as a flicker of emotion, she simply looked on at her brother's back.

Her trust in her brother's skills was absolute.

Neither was that trust betrayed.

Four punches. One man, one blow. Each fist struck a vital area with unrelenting precision, leaving the gangsters crawling about on the floor.

Tatsuya resumed his advance.

For each step he took, the president took two steps back.

Then he stopped short. The moment he felt he had bumped into someone, he was seized by both arms and forced to kneel. Looking back in a hurry,he was greeted by the sight of uniformed police officers.

There were eight in total. Two were overpowering the president, four secured the gangsters rolling around on the ground, while two more came to stand before Tatsuya.

Miyuki walked to stand just behind him. Glancing alternatively between the two, the policeman began an inarticulate delivery.

"Umm, we want to hear your side of events, so could you accompany us to the station please?"

Tatsuya couldn't say he was surprised at this attitude. Even if you say it was self defense, they had engaged in violence in public. It wouldn't have been strange if they had actually been detained.

Looking closely, the shape of a CAD could be made out around the policeman's wrist. He was evidently a mage. If so, knowing both Tatsuya and Miyuki were also mages, it could only be wondered if he felt a sense of solidarity with them. Still, his sheepish attitude was a little worrying.

"Uh, in addition....."

The partner of the cop who had first spoken began to say something, stammering out a preface. On his waist was a handgun shaped CAD.

The officer put his hand behind his waist. Was he going for handcuffs?

At Miyuki's arched eyebrows, Tatsuya wordlessly gestured for prudence. The officer's hand stretched out to the two of them. Or rather, to Miyuki.

In his hand was, not his police notebook, but another private notebook.

".....You're Shiba Miyuki san right? You were in this year's Nine Schools Competition. I'm an OB[6] of First High myself.....

If you could, may I get your signature?"

Another policeman held out another rare classic for these days, a fountain pen.

Tatsuya and Miyuki exchanged a glance, before Miyuki gave a sly smile at the two officers.

[August 31st (3)]

"I didn't think we'd see an OB in a place like that."

Remembering the days events, Miyuki couldn't help giggling. Tatsuya also struggled to rein in laughter, before leaking out a smile.

"It's not that surprising when you think about it. The only magic high school in Kanto is First High, so a mage who became an officer in Tokyo is most likely to have graduated from there."

"That's true. In any case, the reason we spent hardly any time at the station was because the guy was a huge Miyuki fan..... In other words it's all thanks to you. You were a great help."

"You're welcome. Being able to be helpful to Onii-sama is more important than anything."

"Still, for them to actually invite us out to tea was totally overwhelming. It was hard to refuse."

"Well!? That was hardly Miyuki's fault!"

At that the two of them looked at each other, and once again, exchanged smiles.

Miyuki was sucking on a straw, and her glass was pretty much empty.

Tatsuya's cup had likewise been reduced to just ice.

Seeing his sister remove her mouth from the straw and looking towards him, Tatsuya rose from his seat.

"Now then, the bank's about to open, so let's head out."

"Alright. I'll clean up the cups, so please wait there a bit Onii-sama."

"No, I'll help."

As he said so, without waiting for a word of protest, he plucked the tray right out of her hands. It looked rough, but actually the ice stirring in the glasses didn't even make a sound. With a rather peeved expression, Miyuki swiftly hid her true emotions as she followed Tatsuya into the kitchen.

Going to the bank is no longer for making deposits. As a result of the evolution of personal checks and the electronic wallet, money cards are widespread and cash is now rarely used. Nor do you go to make transfers. Both transactions and transfers are pretty much all recorded online, and using the bank in such situations is also limited to special cases.

The reason Tatsuya was going was to update his ID required for such online services. There is no periodic determined time for which you have to do so. You can continue using it from the date of issue without a single update if you wish. Only the ID is required, not the update. Updating the ID is a part of security, and by proceeding straight instore in person rather than authenticating the data online increases the security.

Tatsuya updated his ID every three months. The average renewal rate was twice a year, so four times would be classed as a higher frequency. It was not unusual for some more paranoid users to update theirs on a weekly basis. In the cool store, Miyuki and Tatsuya stood perfectly in line shoulder to shoulder and waited to be called up. They didn't do so because they were cold, but rather they had walked that way from the station to the bank under the hot sun as well.

The reason was because people had the frequent habit of hitting on Miyuki. Not many guys, especially of the same age, looking at Miyuki would dare to immediately try to make her accompany them or go out with them, but dealing with just a single one would take a considerable amount of time. Therefore, they decided in advance that whenever walking through the city they would act as lovers.

When Miyuki accompanied Tatsuya outside, such as for shopping or someplace she wants to go or something she wants to watch, being able to stick to her brother like this was probably just as much a factor as anything else. Case in point, even though there was nothing particularly interesting about standing around in the bank lobby, Miyuki seemed as cheerful as ever.

--her brother complex left no room for doubt.

That aside, modern banks often do not store cash since their utility is so limited.

In place of cash, money cards were used to shift around large amounts of money. The issuer is able to systematically put on hold transactions. Unlike with checks there is nothing in circulation, the only one inconvenienced is the party in question. For that reason, the existence of the bank robber is becoming ever more an endangered species.

--that should have been the case.

"This is pretty rare....."

Tatsuya and Miyuki had just come upon a scene with that very same endangered species.

Four men had just burst into the store brandishing shoddy remodeled handguns, threatening the bank clerks and customers. The ski masks they hid their faces behind in the midst of summer gave a rather retro feel.

They wore grimy jumpers, as they swung a Boston bag onto the counter.

Their style was so traditional that an onlooker might even be confused as to whether this was a bizarre attraction of some kind or something, but from the desperate yelling they directed at the bank staff one could surmise that they might just possibly might be the real thing.

"Onii-sama, what should we do?"

With eyebrows raised Miyuki looked up at Tatsuya, and asked him in a business as usual tone.

"If you like, I can handle this."

Her usual feeling of not wanting to cause bother to Tatsuya came to the fore.

"No, there's no need for us to interfere."

Laughing, Tatsuya put his hands on Miyuki's shoulders. He lightly patted her.

Miyuki happily buried her head in Tatsuya's chest.

For the other customers who made anxious expressions and stiffened at this scenario, this 'could not care less' attitude was less than familiar. Needless to say, these two who exuded such a relaxed mood in the turbulent atmosphere stood out pretty damn well.

If you need an explanation for the sake of Tatsuya's honor, he hadn't said there was no need to interfere just so he could flirt around with his sister. Strictly speaking, his current actions were simply to appease her. Just because bank robberies had become such rare crimes didn't mean banks didn't have security systems in place to combat it. A bank robbery would never succeed with just remodeled handguns anyway.

The proof of that was evident before them. A previously transparent shield had extended from the counter to the ceiling to prevent all access. Within that shield, another semi transparent shield descended from the ceiling to cover the open window before the clerk.

The Boston bag caught in that window was torn apart. If the robber's arm had been there, it was probable it would have fractured seriously enough to even require amputation.

One of the robbers fired a bullet at the shield. It didn't even faze the first layer.

The clear outer shield appeared to be made of a material similar to high viscosity liquid. It prevented collateral damage. Seeing that, Tatsuya was impressed by the design.

One of the robbers spat then looked back into the lobby. Looking right at the man, Tatsuya averted his gaze. What the man's eyes settled upon was Miyuki. Being suddenly stared at (she felt), she hurriedly cast her face downwards.

A glimpse could be seen of the man's eyes from the gaps in the mask. Putting the fear and tension of the fleeing customers in the lobby aside, from the unpleasant smile he wore it seemed this man in particular had a short temper. Anyway, it was safe to say that Tatsuya and Miyuki had caught the man's attention.

Tatsuya sensed his malice. He wouldn't be much of a bodyguard otherwise. Of course, there was little chance of a robber looking at them with friendly eyes. He could also perceive the sadistic light that shone in his eyes.

Miyuki also realized the robber was looking at her with such eyes. She huddled closer into Tatsuya's chest. It was the splitting image of looking frightened in the face of the situation. Judging from his smirk, the robber thought so too. But Tatsuya, who could feel Miyuki's body through her thin clothes, knew there was no tension in her. His sister wasn't nervous in the least. If he could see her expression, he wouldn't have been surprised if she was trying to stifle laughter.

Subconsciously, he hid his own wry smile under his signature pokerface. He hoped it wasn't too unnatural, as he then made an anxious expression and held Miyuki's hand tightly. It wasn't something he normally did, but he was also perfectly proficient in drama if it came to it.

The eyes of the four robbers converged on the two. It was impossible to see clearly under the masks, but it was easy to tell from their

exposed eyes that they were grinning broadly. Miyuki and Tatsuya's acting must have stimulated them quite well.

Tatsuya went so far as to tremble a little. Even he thought that was probably a bit much, but the robbers seemed to drink it up.

Their attention had completely diverted from the other customers in the lobby. A security system that even took into account ricochets, should definitely extend beyond just cutting off the counter from the lobby.

The immediate focus of the robbers was the two of them. They completely failed to notice the beams forming above them in a rectangular pattern. Before they knew it, the ceiling had been replaced by stereoscopic images. From the girders, people dropped in onto the heads of the robbers. The conditioned wiry guards overpowered the robbers in the blink of an eye.

Tatsuya wasn't particularly surprised at the scene. For someone able to sense others presences, something such as a stereoscopic screen was no shield whatsoever. As he was waiting, he had always been aware that there were guards ready for deployment overhead.

The bank staff of course didn't know he was like that. Miyuki, still huddled in his chest, would by common sense be seen as crying in relief at the close of a tense situation. They thought Tatsuya's arms were hiding her face as he embraced her because of that. Truthfully, he had simply read the mood and was trying to hide her smile from the somber staff and guards.

With Miyuki's head still cradled in his arms, the bank manager came out to Tatsuya. Asking his name, he apologized profusely and offered him exemption from fees for one year as compensation for the distress. Unsure of how to look, Tatsuya maintained his pokerface-- at that, the bank manager's expression visibly tensed-- before accepting the offer. In the eyes of most people, that really was a relatively dangerous situation after all.

After being told Tatsuya had come to update his ID, the manager called a subordinate to carry out the necessary proceedings. Tatsuya gently released Miyuki, and she hid her face behind her long hair as she allowed herself to be guided by the shoulder.

There was no chance of being spied upon during the process, as it was all carried out by a machine in a private room. Entering, away from the eyes and ears of others, the two of them finally dropped the act and, facing each other, burst out laughing.

This encounter with the bank robbers was the one unusual occurrence the two siblings experienced that day.

That incident the two went through on that last day of summer vacation, in the minds of the two, was organized along with the others into their 'memories of a certain summer'.

# *Presidential Elections and the Queen*

## Chapter 1

“It’s already the month that we have to resign…”

The atmosphere of the Student Council room, initially swollen with talk of the summer vacations, subtly changed when Mayumi’s pronouncement was made.

Until that time, the usual mix of males and females who shared lunch in the Student Council were going on about their first day back or their experiences over the summer.

Compared to their usual daring conversation which contained phrases such as “remaining chaste before marriage” and “the age of free sex”, what they did during the summer paled as a topic. Although the reasons not to have sex before marriage were usually something like “do not give into a sweet talking man”, the conclusion might be the same, as before the “free sex era” the consciousness behind it differs greatly. In the end, just because sexually experienced women aren’t penalized by society doesn’t mean “doing it” is nothing to a woman. They don’t want to be talked about as cock teasers or bragged about in locker rooms. In conclusion, the young ladies who congregated in the Student Council room were not going to treat themselves as cheap merchandise, even though they were girls who possessed a large number of contraceptive options. Pregnancy could no longer occur from accidents or crimes.

Be that as it may, “forcibly took off my jacket”, “strongly pressed me to the bed”, “caressed the nape of my neck with his breath” and like phrases continually let loose before his eyes was enough to make a healthy young man ill at ease. To say nothing of the same man having to endure lines like “I wanted a little better mood”, “I wanted to be able to wear white” and others proclaimed around him with complete naturalness.

This could be happening because he was no longer being treated as a male, or even that they forgot he was there; however, from the beginning, they had shamelessly talked like this in the presence of a member of the opposite sex. For a while now, Tatsuya had been fleeing from this kind of talk by concentrating his eyes and consciousness on a magic book (the Public Moral room had a surprisingly good collection). Whatever twist the conversation took he could tune it out.

Nevertheless, possibly because he was expecting it, this change of conversation penetrated his consciousness.

“Now that you mention it, the Student Council President election is this month.”

“Yes, the election is at the end of the month, but we need to set up the format from next week on. We have to announce the candidates and do all the other stuff that needs to be done.”

This affirmative answer to Tatsuya’s question was put forth by Suzune.

But, was this completely poised senpai who conversed on topics forbidden to people under eighteen, much less under fifteen, under “we're all girls here” without even a snicker? Tatsuya entertained doubt, but nevertheless, the content of his next question was different.

“What is the format?”

'Were there any materials?' was the gist of the question, but Suzune correctly understood Tatsuya’s point.

“If there is more than one candidate, an election is held. That being said, because the students who can become President are limited, it’s fought out within the family after all.”

“Within the family?”

“For the past five years, the Student Council President has held the post of top student to enter university.”

Now that she mentioned it, he has some memory of hearing that the first day he was called to this room.

“To summarize, the Student Council President is decided without being elected.”

“It is not limited to that method. It’s been that way for the past five years; six years before that it was different. It’s just that there’s never been a case of a student becoming Student Council President without becoming a member of the Student Council first, and this time as well because even if an election is held, it should be a one on one battle between Hattori-kun and Nakajou-san. What’s probably going to happen is, things will be talked out before the election and will be down to one candidate.”

"I see; if that’s the case it is certainly 'within the family'." Tatsuya grasped the concept.

The one who didn’t grasp the concept was the one who was being mentioned as a candidate.

“It’s impossible for me to become Student Council President! We don’t need a discussion; I don’t intend on becoming a candidate.”

Tatsuya certainly grasped that you couldn’t hold the post of Student Council President with teary eyes, however,

“Do you mean that six years prior someone other than the top student held the post of Student Council President?”

“So Hanzou-kun will be the next Student Council President.”

Immersed in their talk, the Public Moral chief and the student body president didn’t seem to pay attention to what was going on around them.

Whatever their personal opinions, policy-wise Azusa was closest to them.

So while they could certainly understand why she would want to throw away the post of president…

(… She doesn’t seem to want to do it…)

If there are no other candidates aside from Azusa, it would be imperative to persuade her, but with Hattori also a candidate, that wouldn’t be the most proper way to go about it, Tatsuya thought.

“So Nakajou-senpai was last year's top student.”

However, Miyuki’s thinking seemed to be going on a different angle than Tatsuya’s. She seemed to be aiming at different aspects, but Tatsuya thought he could see what his sister was up to. As Miyuki was pointing out and Tatsuya was aware of himself, “Hattori was also one of last year’s top students.”

“That’s right; there wasn’t much difference between the all-around scores, right?”

Mayumi nodded an acknowledgement to Miyuki and directed her question to Azusa, but Suzune was the one who replied.

“For theory, the order for the top spots were Isori-kun, followed by Nakajou-san and Hattori in third place. In the practical, Hattori-kun took the Top place over Nakajou-san by a narrow margin. The all-around top student was also Hattori-kun followed by Nakajou-san by a narrow margin."

Putting all this upon the school’s bulletin board in a big display each semester as an incentive to study is really meaningless, Tatsuya thought.

"I might be called the rotten apple that spoils the barrel… but from the start, most serious students can’t cross swords with the Student Council President and the chief…" at least, that was Tatsuya's assessment of Suzune.

“So in practical skills, Nakajou-senpai was higher than Chiyoda-senpai?”

Miyuki had already understood this point, but while attending the Nine Schools Competition, becoming familiar with this person had created a different impression.

“That’s because that girl Kanon is too sloppy.”

“She has a majestic quality to her at least?”

At Mari’s blunt opinion, Mayumi agreed with a forced smile.

“To the contrary; it’s just the slender A-chan looks to be unsuited for sports competitions.”

“Nonetheless, Nakajou is going to be an athlete in the coming year, right?”

Although she had been listening to Mayumi as if she wasn’t being discussed, when Mari’s dropped bombshell, Azusa’s body begun to shake in response.

“… I may have introduced the topic… but this is next year, Nakajou? There’s no point in getting all scared about it right now.”

“Th… that’s right. Next year… next year, aside from Chiyoda-san, there’s Shiba-san, Kitayama-san, Mitsui-san and others; we have plenty of prospective athletes…”

As Azusa forced herself to reply with a peculiarly weird voice, Mayumi’s face took on a triumphant look.

“Well, there are a lot of great prospects among this year's freshman girls… the third years can’t just push the burden upon their underclassmen.”

“No, such a thing, placing a burden, I just meant the right person for the right job, that is…”

If that was the case, it was certainly logical; gazing at her with his half closed eyes and hard to refute, the Student Council President had it tough, Tatsuya realized.

◊ ◊ ◊

When he stepped into the Public Moral room after six weeks away, it was unexpectedly crowded.

“I didn’t get any notice of a meeting?”

Tatsuya inquired of Mari who was, for some reason, standing at the entrance; she nodded with the dignity of her office.

“That’s correct, I don’t have any memory of sending out a notice.”

“So this is a ceremony in honor of the first day of the new semester?”

“The inaugural ceremony takes place only once a year.”

“This isn’t some kind of special membership meeting?"

“Well, now”

Upon Mari’s reply, Tatsuya made a light bow and turned to retrieve his personal recorder from his locker with a brisk pace — but he didn’t get three steps before he stopped.

Looking behind him, he found standing at exactly the same distance as before — to be clear, shadowing him exactly — Mari, gazing back at him.

“…Is there something?”

“It’s not work. But that doesn’t change the fact that there is a big event for the Public Moral Committee.”

“Ahh…”

At Tatsuya’s cautious response, Mari adopted an “oh, well” expression.

“…It’s best to go to the heart of the matter directly with this kind of thing.”

“I’ve glanced through the important news.”

“What I’m talking about is a completely inter-committee kind of thing.”

She was glancing around while she was talking with a “is there anything that needs to be taken care of…” kind of feeling that Tatsuya perceived.

In the end, the one to give in was Mari.

“There is no term of office for the Public Moral members."

“I know. Although you select a replacement, there is no need to resign; it all seems a little strange.”

“We tend to cling to this delicious position. Every graduating class selects their replacements, but quite a few of us remain in position until graduation.”

She gave a subtle shrug of her shoulders as she spoke. Perhaps she was thinking of the special privileges of the Public Moral Committee with an “oh, well” thought floating in her mind.

“To tell the truth, one of the third years resigned at the end of last semester. Today, the replacement is coming.”

Tatsuya raised his eyebrows in suspicion at Mari’s words.

“This is a welcome party?”

“By no means; we’re not that cohesive an organization. You understand that by now, right?”

Certainly, the Public Moral Committee was an organization more suited for words like “division” and “antagonism” rather than unity. Because he understood that, the whole thing gave Tatsuya an anxious mood. Given those facts, what was this crowd doing here?

“It’s just that it’s unusual to have a girl chosen as a member, so everybody who was free came to take a look at her.”

I got it, Tatsuya thought. The members have not gathered out of comradery but rather curiosity. However, for that reason—

“It’s about time to choose a chief.”

At Tatsuya’s point, an ill-humored expression silently came over Mari’s face. Apparently there were many things on her mind and she didn’t want to trouble her kouhai, so she was choosing her words in order to gloss over things.

“…Well, in my case it’s part of my job. It’s only right that I greet the new member. By the way, could I trouble you to look after things for a while?”

“…You mean me?”

Tatsuya’s request for clarification was only natural. To entrust all the organizational details and the orientation of a new member to the guy at the absolute bottom rung of the ladder was questionable.

“I mean you.”

Nevertheless, Mari’s expression was 100% percent earnest.

“I don’t know anything about the person who is joining us. I am sympathetic to her… but even so, I don’t think you can leave all this work to a freshman.”

“Nonetheless, you are the only one in the Public Moral Committee who can do it.”

Since this point was certainly true with regards to the Public Moral Committee, Tatsuya’s defeat was decided. The new member was exactly who Tatsuya thought it would be.

“Let’s get this over with a quick face-to-face meeting… Kanon, for today, work with Tatsuya-kun and grasp all you need to for patrolling.”

He didn’t think a face-to-face meeting with someone as well known as Kanon was necessary, but Mari said this after introducing Kanon to members scattered around the room and delivering the responsibility to Tatsuya as promised.

As usual, Tatsuya had no veto rights. Not just him, this instruction was only given after all the other members had left, so Kanon was limited to a choice of Tatsuya or Mari.

“Huh—? Mari-san is not going to instruct me?”

For Kanon, Mari was obviously the better choice. To indicate this right in front of Tatsuya was certainly a rude gesture, but Tatsuya could comprehend her dissatisfaction very well. Not only to not be instructed by Mari, to not even be instructed by another second year like herself and to have an underclassman act as a senpai was not going to be fun for Kanon. Mari wanted him to take the role of her coach, but deep in his heart, Tatsuya was rooting for Kanon to make more of an argument.

“I can’t be your guide, because the underhanded guys see my silhouette and quietly sneak away. The point of this is that Tatsuya-kun is number one in incident encounters among committee members. As a result, he is number one in number of apprehensions, too.”

“Oh, if that’s the case, I see.”

Unfortunately, Kanon quickly and easily understood.

Anyway, Tatsuya was left with a feeling that he should be questioning Mari’s remarks with the “as a result,” but he soon resigned himself to the situation. The end of this fruitless task was in sight.

“No one assigns patrol routes. We don’t need to go over every area within the school. My and other committee members' patrol routes do not keep to a routine, but the majority of the members seem to patrol a set path.” Unpleasant as it was, a job is a job. Walking side by side, Tatsuya addressed a serious lecture to Kanon as they went. However,

“Hmm…. Shiba-kun is highly adaptive.”

Kanon’s complimentary outburst and his explanations had no logical connection.

“But just after you started school, you began to patrol the school alone, right. And even I’ve heard various stories of your legendary new student week actions.”

“Well, a lot happened back then…”

He felt that her awe was misplaced but he was reluctant to be disagreeable. —Suddenly being thrown into solo patrol operations was the norm. Kanon’s treatment was extremely protective; speaking these various truths, however, would please neither one of them. Tatsuya continued his lecture instead of disagreeing.

“In my case, I place importance on visiting the practice rooms. This is because if you look at old patrol logs, there are very few problem causing incidents in the classrooms.”

“That’s because the classrooms are monitored. For romantic type vulgarities, it’s a mood killer; even if you want to do it, you can’t.”

“Romance?…”

In general, he had some interest in reading fiction, but any curiosity he had in erotica and how he should respond if a person confesses their love had been sealed.

“You don’t go to the gym or the grounds? Doesn’t more trouble happen there than in the practice rooms?”

“Except for special circumstances like the new student invitation period, those areas as a general rule are under the jurisdiction of the clubs. Of course, if there’s a momentary outbreak of hostilities between individual factions, it becomes the Public Moral Committee's time to intervene.”

Kanon broke her ties to the clubs when she joined the Public Moral Committee, but since she herself had been a member of the track and field club (her specialty had been hurdles), there was no way she wasn’t aware of the clubs' self-governing privileges.

“No one will mind if we just go and take a look around, right? Trotting over once trouble has arisen means it's too late to intervene.”

Even so, suggesting that kind of action… this sounded like she was brimming with the desire to expand her territory by raising havoc, Tatsuya thought.

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In accordance with Kanon's strong request, the day's patrol took the all important tour of the gymnasium. (Tatsuya was seriously troubled over the necessity of accompanying her.)

In relation to the school grounds, it was the second building if you came from the entrance.

By sheer coincidence, today was the Kenjutsu club's practice day.

"…The older Shiba. That's a different girl than the one you usually bring when you watch us."

"Please don't talk like I'm a playboy."

Whether he was serious or joking was hard to tell from the tone of his voice — but Tatsuya thought he felt the jest was at least partly serious — the one who had come to talk to him was Kirihara.

"Really, Kirihara-kun. Isn't saying stuff like that rude to Chiyoda-san? Because Chiyoda-san is serious about Isori-kun."

"…Well, if that's the way it is, it's okay."

The one whose outburst eased Kanon's discomfort and made Tatsuya breathe a deep sigh of relief was Sayaka.

The reason Sayaka of the Kendo Club was participating in the Kenjutsu club's practice wasn't so that they could use the club hour to date.

Since the spring incident, the sports clubs who used magic and the sports who didn't felt they had to increase opportunities for mutual interaction between themselves. Especially with the clubs that were

basically the same, sports clubs whose only difference was the rule about whether magic could be used or not in competition had taken it upon themselves to bridge the gap by undertaking positive actions; thus, the current trend was born.

The Kendo club and the Kenjutsu club pioneered the trend. Sayaka and Kirihara were the first to use that excuse — that is, they were the first participants to take part in a mutual exchange program.

—Therefore, this means these two are not practicing together just because they like each other.

Enough gossip.

Tatsuya, despite Sayaka's support(?), was still getting the stink eye from Kirihara, so he explained the situation.

"Chief Watanabe ordered us to go together."

Although what he said was true, it would have been better to act as if he didn't need to excuse his behavior. Volunteering information like this made it seem like he was using his job to cover up immoral behavior.

"Eh, then that rumor was true."

Kirihara not only unexpectedly readily believed him, but made a meaningful comment.

"A rumor?"

"Oh, Shiba-kun doesn't know?"

"The rumor about Chiyoda becoming the next Public Moral Chief and Chief Watanabe making the rounds to get it approved. Frankly, don't you think that girl having to make the rounds to get it approved is such a tiresome thing for her to do?"

Tatsuya realized the 'rumor' Sayaka and Kirihara were announcing tag-team fashion was completely true, but in the face of this spectacle, he chose silence.

“It’s just like they said it was. It’s Chiyoda, so they've got to make an exception. Because Watanabe-senpai really likes Chiyoda. In order to be able to appoint Chiyoda-san, who has no experience, as her successor, she has to make a lot of effort.”

Even though Tatsuya didn’t say anything, they didn’t stop adding to the heap.

“Hmm, that girl not only looks like a Takarazuka[7], but she thinks like one, too, eh? Well if Chiyoda becomes chief she’ll certainly make quite a picture.”

The Girls Opera, since the beginning of the modern era, could be called a traditional theatrical entertainment, so Tatsuya didn’t feel that ‘thinks like a Takarazuka’ was a particularly dishonorable appraisal, but it seemed that Kanon’s sensibilities reached a different conclusion.

“Oh, you’re treating not just me but Mari-san as lesbians… Kirihara-kun, aren’t you very brave.”

“Wait a minute!” Behind Kanon’s back, as if someone was painting Acala[8], an aura of fire rose up. (To be accurate, it was an explosion of violently charged psion particles.)

“I never said lesbian!”

Despite the fact that in terms of simple power, Kanon was rumored to be number one among the second years, and the fact that she also had great rage on her side, Kirihara waved his head and fist excitedly.

“No problem.”

At the violently strong Kanon’s pronouncement, Tatsuya breathed a deep sigh.

His right hand made a swift light thrust.

“Huhh!”

With an out of pitch screech, the violent dance of psion particles subsided.

“Wh-What did you do?”

From her position sunken down on the floor, the red-faced Kanon was using both of her scalding eyes to glare at Tatsuya, the cause of her minor indignity.

“…That was more effective than expected. Truthfully, I thought he was putting me on about ‘pleasure points’, but...”

It was Yakumo’s deceitful Tenketsujutsu[9].

Located on the back are some “spots that cause pleasant feelings”—he was just taught them this morning. He used a thrust with his index finger on one after he watched Kanon get increasingly red faced. As she listened to his monologue, he modified his facial expression.

“Chiyoda-senpai, what would happen if Public Moral members went around starting their own personal brawl?”

“Aah… but he...”

“There is no 'but he'. Okay, after the occurrence of sexual harassment, it’s best to have the Disciplinary Committee conduct a trial. As a general rule, the testimony of a Public Moral Committee member can be considered independent evidence.”

“Oi?”

In the confusion brought on by the swift change in the status quo, Kirihara kept out of it; nonetheless Tatsuya and Kanon didn’t take their eyes off of each other.

“O K A Y? Will you please restrain yourself from acting like a pot boiling over.”

“…Understood”

The sulky faced Kanon was too busy averting her eyes to be aware of Sayaka’s mutter of “… doesn't what you just did count as sexual harassment, too?”

“Now that you mention it, isn't the Student Council election coming up real soon?”

At last, the chaotic situation had subsided. In order to move from the talk of the Public Moral succession, Sayaka had brought up this topic for the second time today (at least for Tatsuya). To keep any club members from putting fuel on the fire, Sayaka hospitably introduced the perfect water cooler gossip topic.

“At the end of the month, right. Yeah, I’d call that real soon.”

Kirihara responded to Sayaka’s question. “I’ve heard it’s going to be a one-on-one match between Hattori-kun and Nakajou-san.”

Paying no attention to the difference between first and second course, Kanon quickly joined her fellow second years’ conversation.

“Nope, Hattori isn’t doing it.”

For Tatsuya the déjà vu conversation had been broken up by the revelation of a new fact.

“Oh, really?”

It looked like Kirihara’s words were a surprise to Kanon.

“Yep, that Hattori is going to succeed the chief of Club Management. I heard it from him myself that he wasn’t going to take part in the election.”

“Hmmm, Hattori-kun… however it’s proper. Club Management can’t be done by anybody without brute strength.”

Kanon accepted Kirihara’s answer with a proper nod.

He could see what they were saying. The Club Management Group certainly had a more violent image than the Student Council, Tatsuya thought.

Even under normal circumstances, scouting for club members, taking space for club activities and the like caused many inevitable disputes.

Thanks to Katsuto’s glare, great big riots hadn’t happened, but an ordinary person couldn’t do the same thing.

However — Tatsuya thought,

This meant that of the strongest candidates for Student Council President, both would not take part in the election.

Just who is going to be the next Student Council President…

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After the patrol was over, homeward bound.

Miyuki had just finished with the Student Council.

Leo, Erika, Mizuki, Honoka, and Shizuku were done with club activities.

Mikihiko was done with his independent training in the practice room.

It had been a while since Tatsuya could mingle with his usual circle. They crowded around a table in a coffee shop that was on the way to the station.

And in nearly no time the topic became the upcoming election.

“Hmmm… to tell the truth, a little unreliable.”

Leo gave a cold appraisal of Azusa.

“But her true abilities tower over others.”

“I believe it’s better to have a gentle person as Student Council President.”

Shizuku and Mizuki seemed to be members of the Support Azusa party.

“Anyway, the possibility of Hattori-senpai has completely disappeared, right?”

This was a repeated inquiry of Erika.

“Aah, it seems like he himself has told others about it so there doesn’t seem to be a way to be mistaken about it. Even the Student Council President can’t steal the person who is the next successor to the Club Management Group Leader.”

Tatsuya replied with an affirmative.

“That’s true… I don’t believe even those people could stand against chief Juumonji.”

Countless nods of yes, yes came from Erika’s side.

“Therefore, after all, Nakajou-senpai is the only possible person who can become a candidate.”

Mizuki returned to the topic of the next Student Council President.

“But, she herself has said she doesn’t want to do it, right? Okay, Miyuki, become a candidate!”

“Wait, Erika, what nonsense are you spouting?”

Miyuki’s eyes widened in response to Erika’s surprising remark.

But, unexpectedly, it seemed that Erika was really taken with her own suggestion.

“It’s not like there’s any regulation prohibiting first years from becoming Student Council President, right? In the recent Nine Schools Competition, Miyuki not only took part in the Newcomers Icicle Break, but battled against second and third years in Mirage Bat and won. I think your true power and popularity make you perfect.”

“Don’t say such nonsense. In general, a high school student’s ‘true power’ cannot only be measured by magic power?”

“If it’s scholarship, we have Tatsuya here. Once you become Student Council President, you can appoint anyone as staff.”

Mizuki entered support for Erika's position in Miyuki and Erika's back and forth conversation.

"Yeah, that's right. President Saegusa was getting rid of the first course only limit."

"Even Mizuki…"

It was a superficially chiding remark, but a waver could be felt in Miyuki's voice.

"Yeah, yeah. That's right, if you were president, you could head hunt Tatsuya-kun from the Public Moral Committee… ."

At Erika's Mephistopheles[10]-like (a young girl version) whisper, Miyuki visibly trembled.

"Conversely, wouldn't it be okay if Tatsuya became Student council president?"

"Oh, that sounds interesting."

As childhood friends, they didn't compete with each other, but this time Mikihiko blew Erika's outrageous idea out of the water with one of his own.

While Leo gazed around blankly at these evil plots, Tatsuya asserted, "That's impossible."

"Certainly, if it was Miyuki there might be enough support for the idea to make it happen, but I could not collect enough ballots."

However, Shizuku had a different opinion.

"But, Tatsuya-san, you took a major role in the Nine Schools Competition,"

"No, Shizuku… I was part of the backstage crew for the victory and only competed in one event. It's said that the work of those who work behind the scenes can not be comprehended if you're viewing the front."

Once again, Tatsuya denied the possibility of being elected, but Honoka raised her voice in a fervent rebuttal.

“Still, if Tatsuya-san was ever placed on the ballot, I would absolutely vote for him!”

“Me too Onii-sama. If Onii-sama ever ran for office, I would campaign for you by distributing leaflets or anything else you wanted me to do.”

Surrounded on both sides by Miyuki and Honoka, who were subtly competing over who was more enthusiastic, Tatsuya realized he had a slight headache.

## Chapter 2

One week had passed since the start of the new semester.

At last it was time to officially announce the Student Council President election, even among those who were not really involved (especially students in classes E to H). "Who will be a candidate?”, "Who has influence?", and similar topics could be heard. As classmates exchanged morning greetings, Tatsuya, who was going to his assigned terminal, heard the voice of the previously arrived Mikihiko call out “Morning, Tatsuya”.

“Morning. Mikihiko, you’re always early.”

“Ha ha, you’re right. Because I’ve recently been given more Asa no Gongyou to do, I really wanted to take on things a little more slowly, but… tradition.”

The word, Gongyou, originally indicated Buddhist religious services. But, probably due to the influence of the Shinto-Buddhist amalgamation, even people like Mikihiko, who came from a long line of Shintoists, used the word ‘Gongyou’. In short, “Asa no Gongyou” was early morning religious rites. That the phrase “been given more” properly meant “I can participate again”, Tatsuya grasped from the

crumbs of information he got when talking to both Mikihiko himself and Erika.

His friend was not only steadily regaining his power, but increasing his power as well. He was happy for him, but he was also envious. Previously, Mari had tossed around a joke about him transferring into course one, but Tatsuya thought Mikihiko might really become the first person to transfer from course two into course one.

“By the way Tatsuya, I have to ask you about something you might think is weird, but…”

“Something weird?”

This blunt but muttered inquiry seemed to be coming from out of left field. His first response was to tell him to proceed. After all, the two of them were fellow students, but he withheld comment and slowed to keep in step with him.

“I don’t think this is very weird, but Tatsuya, is it really true that you’re a candidate for Student Council President?”

“…What did you say?”

There was no way Tatsuya was not listening to what Mikihiko said. Tatsuya responded this way because his astonishment was so great.

“No, well, I’m asking because there is this rumor that ‘Tatsuya is a candidate for Student Council President’ going around.”

“Rumor…?”

“I didn’t do it!”

Tatsuya didn’t consider himself especially good at reading people, but Mikihiko proclaimed innocence with every excited gesture.

“Yesterday, after school in the practice room, Tsuzura-sensei questioned me. ‘Is it really true that Shiba Tatsuya is a candidate for Student Council President?’ is what he said.”

Instructor Tsuzura's specialty was magic geometry, and he was also well versed in magic engineering; currently he was teaching the second years. His principal occupation was a university professor.

In the academic world, he was known as an excellent young researcher. It was also proclaimed that he would soon receive the office of associate professor. However, not only his way of thinking—but also his speech and conduct were a little too loose and independent. For disciplinary reasons, he was transferred to a high school associated with his university. Nonetheless… he himself said he wasn't bothered by it; "I can do independent research," the troublesome fellow rejoiced.

Maybe because he had that kind of temperament, he was one of the teachers who made a special effort to look after the second course students. He didn't even limit himself to his assigned year. Tatsuya had also been called over for a chat countless times.

"This tall tale is being spread by them…?"

"Oh, so it is a tall tale? I thought it strange since you said you had no interest in being a candidate the other day."

Tatsuya had a flabbergasted expression as he nodded to the dejected looking Mikihiko.

"I don't think I could get any votes if I was a candidate, and as I said before I don't intend to run. How did this rumor get spread among the teachers?"

"Don't know…"

Mikihiko couldn't possibly know what was going on in the staff room. As expected, all he could do was tilt his head at him.

Even Tatsuya did not ask in the expectation of an answer; he asked it as a way of grumbling.

"It's not just the teachers."

However, contrary to his expectations, testimony that pointed in an unpleasant direction was extracted from a nearby listener.

“During club activities, I heard bits and pieces of the senpais gossiping about it. Surprisingly, everybody seemed receptive to the idea.”

After Leo, who sat in front of him, said that, Erika, who was half sitting, half leaning on Mizuki’s desk, also sang the same tune.

“Oh, now that you mention it, I overheard somebody talking about it yesterday. It was something about a first year who was a member of the Public Moral Committee taking part in the upcoming Student Council election. Now that I’ve considered it, that’s got to be about Tatsuya-kun, right?”

Right? Tatsuya didn’t want to nod his agreement with what she said, but after synthesizing Mikihiko’s intelligence report as well as Leo’s and Erika’s, no other conclusion could possibly be made.

“Me, too…”

Oh no, not Mizuki as well. Tatsuya wanted take cover under his desk.

“I have a fleeting memory of something like that being said when I was in the Counseling room, yesterday.”

However, upon hearing the identity of whom she heard the rumor from, a “with positivity, anything can be dealt with” kind of feeling was born.

Actually, it was the feeling of knowing that he was going to interrogate Haruka. I think there remain some objections over whether it was really okay to call something like that “positivity”.

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The one who would protest the most about referring to Tatsuya's operational plan as "positivity" would probably be Haruka.

"It's still in the middle of first period!"

In a manner unbecoming of a counselor, Haruka scowled a grimace at Tatsuya, who was visiting the Counseling room.

Apparently, the sneaky way he got the No Head Dragon intelligence (!?) had left her feeling abused. —If you viewed it the way Tatsuya did, it was not like there was a contract that placed restraints on how he could use the bought information.

"The assigned work for first period is completed."

Naturally, Tatsuya felt no mental distress at being hated by Haruka. They shared the same secrets with each other, but not quite, because the cards Tatsuya held were the stronger of the two.

"…Quite the high achiever, aren't you."

"A low achiever. I barely made it in with all the red marks on my practical exams."

"…Somehow, when you say that, I can't hear any sarcasm."

—Between the two of them, they shared what might be called an intimacy that didn't require polite niceties.

"That's because it's true. Well, more importantly, there's something worrying me. I would like to consult you about it."

When Tatsuya made this conversational gambit, Haruka's eyes widened and she straightened her posture automatically.

"Please feel free to consult me about anything."

She was extremely conscious of her professional duties, but her quick switch made him feel slightly uneasy about his ability to pass his classes. Well, it was about time she learned that 'the worry' he had brought to the counselor was outside her official sphere.

“My worry, you’d call it, is the Student Council election at the end of the month.”

“They certainly made a mess of recruiting candidates this time. So that’s it? Has your younger sister been requested to run for Student Council President?”

“Oh yes, I’m certainly worried about that. However, what I wanted to consult you about today concerns a different ‘rumor’.”

“Rumor?”

“Yes, the rumor about me becoming a candidate that’s started floating around the staff room; you wouldn’t happen to know anything about that?”

As Tatsuya broached the subject he stood face to face with Haruka and looked directly into her eyes, for an instant and really for an instant only an ‘oh, no’ look showed on her face.

“You talked to Shibata-san about this yesterday. I would like the details fully explained to me.”

But no matter how short the instant was, any change of expression that occurred under the steady gaze of his eyes would not be missed. There was no way that Tatsuya could have failed to notice it.

“I thought it is unthinkable, but, could Ono-sensei have scattered this rumor that couldn’t have happened around on her own initiative?”

Haruka’s facial muscles relaxed and contracted in a dizzying fashion.

Eventually, her expression settled into her normal amiable smile.

“Yes, indeed that would be ‘unthinkable’. There is no way I would do such an irresponsible thing.”

There was no trace of strain in her lips.

Her facial control skills seemed to have made remarkable progress.

“…How on earth did this tall tale start circulating?”

“What… so it is a tall tale. Well, that’s the way it is… Shiba-kun’s not the type to take the center stage; you’re more the 'pull strings behind the curtain' type.”

“I will not deny it.”

Their eyes met, and the two of them exchanged evil grins.

Perhaps this could be the influence of their shared master.

Nevertheless, a degree of commonality wasn’t reason enough to collude with each other.

“Now then, how on earth did this tall tale about me becoming a candidate for Student Council President start circulating?”

“Sorry, I don’t really know a lot about that?”

“Really, the part you do know is sufficient.”

“…”

Tatsuya looked extremely at ease as he waited for Haruka’s answer.

Playing dumb would gain her nothing, Haruka realized.

To begin with there wasn’t any reason to be silent about what she herself heard.

“…I’m not really sure who said what, but… is it alright to act as if it was one of those verbal message type games? ‘Looks like Hattori-kun won’t run.’ ‘Looks like Nakajou-san won’t run.’ ‘It seems so troublesome to have to search for a presidential candidate.’ ‘Hey, wouldn’t Shiba-san make an amusing one?’…somehow turned into ‘Looks like Shiba-san will run.’ ‘Shiba-kun will run.’ ‘Eh, Shiba-kun?’ ‘Yeah, the Public Moral Committee’s.’ ‘Oh, the one who took part in the newcomers’ tournament?’ ‘Hmm, wouldn’t that be interesting?’ in no time.”

After listening to Haruka, Tatsuya was so exhausted that he felt like he could fall off his chair.

“…How could the teachers believe such a half-baked rumor?”

Well, rumors are naturally irresponsible and half-baked things. His fellow first years and the upperclassmen seem to have fished it out from the water cooler talk, so even if Tatsuya wanted to track the rumor piece by piece, there is no way to track down the pieces.

But, superior people like Tsuzura—at least they're intellectually superior—people serious enough to become professor, the staff shouldn't be as easy to fool.

Tatsuya wasn't quite ready to throw away the possibility that someone might be intentionally manipulating the rumor mill.

"There are more serious people among the students than among the teachers. The details of what happened in April were kept from the students, but since the staff knows the facts…"

"…The Blanche incident?"

"That's right. There are many teachers who rate Shiba-kun quite highly for being central to getting that matter settled."

Unfortunately, he hadn't foreseen this. That that matter would stand out so much… Tatsuya thought he wasn't self aware enough.

"They don't know the exact details because Juumonji-kun kept a lid on those, but they do know that you drove the terrorists off with your own power, and that point causes them to regard you quite highly. Because they want the Student Council President of a magic high school to be extremely powerful, quite a lot of the teachers think it would be amusing to have a first year president if he possessed that kind of supreme power."

…This is getting to be really bad, Tatsuya thought.

With Haruka's words ringing through his head, Tatsuya considered how to handle the matter.

—Before exiting the counseling room, he made certain that he had not made any inquiries into the methods she used to acquire information.

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However, there were a limited number of methods that could be used to squash a baseless rumor. Furthermore none of them were available to him.

Therefore he had to destroy the base that the rumors were springing from; you could call the results of meeting with Haruka quite effective.

Thinking like that might comfort himself, but the weight of his burdens had not lessened.

A class of 25 people was not a lot of people. You could grasp who was doing what with one glance. In addition to him, there were only four people not chit-chatting before instruction started, so twenty people were. He didn't like it, but he could tell that not one of those twenty wasn't whispering the gossip about him.

The fragmentary conversations he could overhear all used words like 'just like I thought', 'President' and 'Election'.

It was well beyond being merely uncomfortable.

"Tatsuya, please. May I have a moment of your time?"

Mayumi made her Royal Entrance (though that is a rather grand description to apply to an upperclassman, these days) into the first year's classroom, stopped directly in front of the desk he was sitting at, and with what could only be called cuteness(!), clasped both hands together and blurted out those words.

Behind her back, Suzune looked at the scene with a disgusted look on her face.

Tatsuya made a fleeting glance at the digital clock running at the corner of his display. Five minutes remained of the break between

first and second period. If they were thinking of returning to the third year classroom, that left only a minute to talk.

“If we say it’s for official Student Council business, none of us receive red marks.”

Mayumi, with her clasped hands, answered the unspoken question she read in Tatsuya’s eyes. Still, the location of those hands was subtly lower. It was a bad omen; she might change her hands into full on prayer mode and imitate a “Virgin Mary” statue.

Both hands together, tearful eyes; if any one could pull off a stunt like that, it was Mayumi.

Second period followed first period and classroom instruction took place via computer terminal. About twenty to thirty minutes passed by without more trouble landing on Tatsuya.

Tatsuya stood up from his seat and, under the gazes of his friends, lightly bowed towards Mayumi.

As if he were exchanging places with Mayumi, he stood in front of his desk and held out his own ID card so the Student Council permit could be entered.

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He was escorted to the Student Council room.

Tatsuya understood why they came and got him now when they knew he was probably going to spend his lunch hour there with them.

“Sorry for interrupting your class, but we only have one more day.”

Upon being offered an apology by Suzune, Tatsuya shook his head and said “No, I don’t mind.”

“Thank you, I am relieved that you say so.”

Phew. Taking an exaggerated breath, Mayumi broached the main topic.

“To be frank, this concerns the upcoming election…”

It met his expectations, exactly.

Tatsuya had already decided on his reply.

“I think it’s too soon for Miyuki.”

“Miyuki-san… How did you know?”

To wide-eyed Mayumi who was obviously thinking “It can’t be, a mind reading technique“, Tatsuya gave a reluctant smile and explained the trick.

“You didn’t wait for the noon break and deliberately came for me during class; therefore, you probably wanted to consult me at a time when Miyuki wouldn’t be there. Also, when you consider the time constraints, I understood that we would be discussing making Miyuki a candidate for Student Council President.”

Tatsuya wasn’t making these comments to make a show of his deductive skills.

Mayumi alone he could probably handle; with Suzune acting as her tag team partner, however, he was afraid that they could persuade him if he didn’t disrupt their strategy at the outset.

His preemptive strike had hit his target, just now.

Before his opponents—especially Suzune—could regroup, Tatsuya had to seize the upper hand to make victory inevitable.

“There is nothing official that bars a first year from becoming Student Council President, right. However, it is too soon for Miyuki. She is not yet able to act as head of this organization.”

“…When she was in middle school, she didn’t undertake a similar duty to Student Council President?”

“I stopped her.”

Suzune’s question received an immediate negative reply.

“When I look at her, all I see is level headedness…”

“Miyuki is still a child. I might be over protective, but she still can’t completely control herself. At least, wait until she can keep her magic from running wild.”

In answer to Mayumi’s inquiry, words of rebuttal seemed to fall to the floor.

Mayumi and Suzune both had faces that looked full of words they wished to speak—mainly, about being “over protective”. There is no “might be” about it—it is a “fact” that you are—however, a tendency to let magic to run wild could not be overlooked in a Student Council President. They could not refute that point.

“—But, we’re stumped. Tomorrow, the public announcement of the election will be made, but we don’t have any candidates.”

“I thought the deadline to announce candidates was one week.”

To Tatsuya’s implied ‘Don’t we have a week to find a candidate?’, Mayumi shook her head with a dark look on her face.

“Narrowing down the choices for the next student body president is the Student Council’s duty. Otherwise, we get overwhelmed by a flood of candidates.”

“…Isn’t having a lot of different candidates running for office considered more respectable?”

“Even compared to an eruption of fights with magic? With everyone battling it out to see who will become Student Council President?”

Certainly, if that happened, the turmoil would be even greater than that of the new student invitation week.

“…Wouldn’t whatever happened…involve only the students who wanted to become Student Council President?”

However, if it was just over who would become Student Council President, they could guard against the uproar.

“Tatsuya-kun, you are being naïve.”

Mayumi crushed Tatsuya’s theory in one blow.

“The Student Council of this school has tremendous privileges, and even after graduation are appraised as being elite. Actually, four years ago, the Student Council at the time advocated a “Democratic Free Election”. On that occasion, the number of seriously wounded people went into the double digits. The “Democratic Free Election” signs were taken down, and the Student Council President strongly recommended the vice president become the next president to get the situation finally under control, according to our records.”

Tatsuya’s doubts were vanquished by Suzune’s astonishingly violent tale.

“…Is this a school or a third world country?”

A groan leaked out of Tatsuya.

“A great talent for magic can destroy the bonds of self-restraint. High school students aren’t adults after all.”

Mayumi was once again before his eyes, entreating him with her hands.

“Can’t you see? Tatsuya-kun might only be able to see her as a mere child, but Miyuki-san would surely be fine. As they say, the person rises to the position.”

It has come to this, Tatsuya thought.

I can still make a show of stringently clinging to the impression that I believe a first year shouldn’t become Student Council President.

So then—

“How about we put Miyuki aside for the moment, and think about the matter of Nakajou-senpai’s refusal of candidacy? Both in terms of

proper order and actual ability, isn’t Nakajou-senpai the most suitable person to become the next Student Council President?”

As Tatsuya made his point, Mayumi’s face turned grim and she sunk into silence.

“…That is certainly true, but…”

Suzune, too, had no words to refute that argument.

Yes, this was so obvious to all of them that no one had to say anything.

If Azusa hadn’t so selfishly backed out, Tatsuya wouldn’t have to debate this issue; that was so clear that no explanation was needed.

Nonetheless, Tatsuya’s next comment was unexpected by both Mayumi and Suzune.

“—If you like, I can go and try to persuade Nakajou-senpai?”

“Eh?… Tatsuya-kun will try to persuade A-chan for us?”

“Yes.”

For Mayumi, this was all so unexpected that she was unsure what face to make for a while, but as the meaning of Tatsuya’s word slowly started to sink in, she unconsciously seized his hand in a tight grip.

“You’ll really do it? You couldn’t possibly fail! You absolutely must do it! Of course, I can rely on you, Tatsuya-kun!”

Tatsuya’s seized hand seemed as if it was about to buzz, so enthusiastically did Mayumi shake it up and down. Glancing at each other's faces, Suzune and Tatsuya flashed wry smiles.

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At lunchtime that day, perhaps because she had an instinct as keen as a small animal for sensing danger, Azusa did not come to the Student Council room. At this rate, she might find a way to avoid me after school as well for some reason, thought Tatsuya, so just after the end of fifth period, he marched into Azusa's classroom. (Magic High school finished at 3 pm in the afternoon; fifth period finished at 2 pm in the afternoon.)

He spied on the state of affairs inside the classroom from the doorway. Azusa was hurriedly making preparations to leave. She was probably trying to engineer an escape before she was caught, but she was tripped up by the fact that a student as serious as herself would never leave her terminal before instruction was over.

Unlike Tatsuya, who wasn't pigeonholed by rules—he probably wouldn't hesitate to soil his hands with a serious crime—dragging his sister along, he stepped into the classroom of Class A second year.

He received some 'who does this guy think he is' stares, primarily directed to him from the male students, but as expected, there was no one with the type of childish mentality that insisted on attacking an underclassman for daring to enter their domain. —The gazes of the female students were different; they evaluated him the same way they evaluated designer goods. The pressure of their gazes was strong, but none of them looked like they were going to bother to confront him, it seemed. Tatsuya shamelessly ignored both forms of stares and went directly to Azusa's seat.

Azusa was aware of his approach midway. However, the interval she spent pondering 'how can I flee without looking strange' meant that he was able to arrive before her eyes.

With a hesitant but forced smile, Azusa stood up.

She had fiercely grasped her schoolbag, but her legs wouldn't move.

There was a 30 cm difference height wise between Tatsuya and Azusa.

Normally, this was not an intimidating advantage in confrontations; sitting or standing, this didn't seem like much of a difference, but somehow he managed to take a position where he appeared to be looking down at her.

An overly bright smile floating across his face, Tatsuya's eyes bore into Azusa's eyes and wouldn't let them escape.

"Nakajou-senpai."

There was nothing outstanding about any of the features of Tatsuya's face and body, nor did he possess the type of beautiful voice that people loved to listen to, but perhaps thanks to the effect combat training had on his throat and lungs, his voice had a deep penetrating quality when he spoke. A young girl might find that his voice radiated a 'somber' or 'mature' feeling.

"I would like to talk to you for a moment."

So a timid, young girl might find his voice radiating an overwhelming pressure.

"Well, I, today is a little…"

"It won't take all that much time."

With that he cut off all escape routes to Azusa, who was still trying to find a way to flee. By strengthening his tone slightly, Tatsuya had added weight to his words.

Rightly or wrongly, Azusa's eyes were held with inconceivable force. On the other hand, if any of Azusa's classmates looked at the two of them (especially the girl students), all they would see was two people staring into each other's eyes while whispering.

The fragmentary conversations that could be overheard, remarks like "surprisingly forceful", "so fierce", and "that might be nice" were paired with glances that hit with regularity.

As the gazes directed at her brother consciously or unconsciously took on an air of flirtation, Miyuki's mood swiftly plummeted.

And so from behind Tatsuya’s back—in short from Miyuki—the “aura of an angry woman” radiated and added to the incredible pressure felt by Azusa.

“Five minutes would be enough.”

“…Well, if it is really only five minutes.”

Azusa trailing behind Tatsuya was the result of what could be called giving into pressure tactics as opposed to being caught by a trite sales pitch.

Her hands were bound by neither handcuffs nor rope, but somehow, no matter how you looked at it, she was the very image of a “perpetrator being escorted by the police”.

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“To be brief.”

Taking a corner seat in a café, Tatsuya sat down and began to talk.

“Nakajou-senpai. Please be a candidate for Student Council President.”

“Just like I thought, this subject… did the Student Council President ask you to persuade me?”

“Yes.”

Originally it was not “the persuasion of Azusa” but rather “the persuasion of Miyuki” who was standing behind him that was requested, but Tatsuya was not breathing a word about that.

“…It's impossible for me to do it. Such an important job, I could never fulfill the duties of Student Council president.”

Azusa’s attitude was more obstinate than predicted. And just now, she looked as if she would burst into tears. If he drove her into a corner,

she really might break down crying. No, there was no “might”, the possibility was high.

However, if he was going to give up just like that, he would never have undertaken persuading her in the first place.

“Hattori-senpai will become the Club Management Group Leader next season, so he can’t be a candidate in the Student Council President election. If Nakajou-senpai doesn’t become a candidate, the election will not be under the control of the Student Council.”

“Wouldn’t that be all right? There are a lot of people more suited to be Student Council President than me.”

As he received Azusa’s aggressive answer, Tatsuya made a deep sigh.

“…”

“…”

The silence didn’t last ten seconds before Azusa begun to show signs of discomfort by fidgeting. She cast a fleeting glance at Tatsuya, who showed no response. Next she cast a fleeting glance in Miyuki’s direction. Miyuki wore the hard to read Archaic Smile[11] on her face and watched Azusa intently. The smile gave off the illusion that you were being trapped by it. Azusa violently averted her face.

Towards Tatsuya.

And so, their gazes aligned perfectly.

Azusa stiffened with a look of “eek” written upon her face.

Tatsuya sighed once again.

“Would it really be all right? —Even if the tragedy of four years ago was repeated?”

Tragedy somehow seems so melodramatic, thought Miyuki who was listening nearby; Tatsuya himself felt the word was melodramatic.

Nonetheless, if you looked at Azusa, you could see her initially shocked face grow paler.

“At that time, there were over ten seriously injured people. I think that Nakajou-senpai is more familiar with the recorded details than I am.”

Pitifully, Azusa’s lips almost imperceptibly trembled with unrest.

However, Tatsuya,

“We should also have pictorial records of that time? Serious wounds caused by magic…..If possible I’d rather not look at something like that.”

And so he struck a final blow.

The Student Council secretary’s main duty was to manage the Student Council’s records. There would be a lot of records for an incident of such proportions, and in order to properly manage those records she would not only have to touch them but examine them too.

As predicted, not only her lips but her entire body was trembling.

“Isn’t history supposed to repeat itself…”

“Wh…what should I do…”

Unto Azusa who wore a cornered expression, Miyuki, who had maintained her silence ever since arriving at the café, answered with a gentle smile.

“If Nakajou-senpai becomes a candidate for Student Council President, that state of affairs can be avoided. It’s all right. Senpai will surely do well.”

Azusa’s vision wobbled violently.

The brother threatens, and the sister offers a helping hand. Truly splendid teamwork.

“Oh, that reminds me…”

The seriousness he had maintained until then dissolved—or appeared to anyway. Indeed, his face said “I just remembered” and Tatsuya brought out the next “carrot”.

“I happened to have come into possession of the FLT flying device and monitor that go on sale next week…”

Upon hearing those words, Azusa’s eyes shined with sparkles.

Her pale face took on a healthy glow and she leaned forward across the table.

“…By that, could you possibly mean the Silver Model flying magic specialized CAD? They only announced the discovery of flying magic in July. To put in practice effectively, it would take the absolutely newest Silver Model!?”

As Tatsuya nodded, Azusa looked at him as if she wanted to eat him.

Her eyes stated “I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it…”

“Well the monitor is a stock item, but they are 'not for sale' goods that haven't been marred by a serial number.”

Azusa’s throat moved as she gulped.

Her eyes were hazy as if she had a fever.

“Nevertheless, performance-wise they’re no different than the 'for sale' model. I thought they would make a fine gift to celebrate your instatement as Student Council President.”

“Really!?”

Azusa raised her voice and made a gleeful cry.

Her chair fell over with a loud sound, but Azusa paid absolutely no attention to the stares she was receiving. It was more like there was no space in her mind that could pay attention.

“Yes, Nakajou-senpai has looked after Miyuki so much. If you are inaugurated as the new Student Council President, I was thinking of giving them to you as a gift to honor the occasion…”

“I’ll do it! I won’t lose to anyone! I’ll absolutely win the presidential election!”





Glaring at the illusion of an unseen opponent, Azusa made powerful declarations.

In the first place, due to the lack of candidates, she herself had been subjected to a round of ‘carrot’ and ‘stick’ persuasion. In this kind of situation, a vote of confidence was not needed and the fact that she had previously refused the job, all had been totally ejected from Azusa’s consciousness.

In front of Azusa who was trapped in a maniac state, Tatsuya and Miyuki stealthily nodded to each other.

## Chapter 3

It is already the final week of September.

The days when the lingering summer heat was intense were many but the days when a remarkably autumn-like wind could be felt were increasing.

“As I was saying, shouldn’t the ambiance of the school be more enthusiastic? What do you think?”

“About what?”

Tatsuya glanced back at Mayumi who tilted her head in inquiry with a slight narrowing of his eyes.

“The presidential election.”

Finally, the Student Body General Meeting would be held tomorrow, and with it, the Student Council Presidential Election.

For Mayumi, today was the last day she would pass in this room as Student Council President; in spite of this, she did not appear to feel sentimental about it.

Even so, the competition for the office of next Student Council President did not appear to include either a fiery debate or a popularity contest.

“…Well, it’s a high school Student Council Presidential election, isn’t it? It might not be something to get fired up about…”

He didn't bother to look back; at most, it was an honorary position that added points to someone’s student record. It wasn't something to get excited about, right?

Aside from what he said, he knew there were other reasons not to get excited about it.

A vote of confidence for the one and only candidate did not seem all that exciting.

Furthermore, the possibility of not getting approved was zero.

The reason for all this wasn’t because the office of Student Council President didn’t have enough glamour to turn someone’s eyes green with envy.

If you looked at it from the perspective of the general public, the president of a magic high school’s Student Council was no more than the head of a high school organization.

The power and influence the office bestowed was close to nothing; it was merely honorary.

On that point, it wasn’t much different from being part of the Student Council of a science high school or an arts high school.

However, the level of ‘Honor’ differed.

It’s only natural; if you think about it a little, you’ll understand.

It is because magic high schools—a high school associated with a national magic university—number only nine in the entire country.

The number of national high schools is not limited to nine schools, but the high schools where you can receive higher education in magic number only nine.

Even if the number was increased, there would be no way to secure the proper number of teachers.

Each year, only nine people experience what it’s like to be the magician respected as the one who holds the office of Student Council President of a magic high school.

That title, limited to those on the path to becoming an elite magician—it is no exaggeration to call, being given such a title, a life changing event.

While unofficial, it can be called an honor comparable to receiving a third class medal.

Of course, to be one of the people who stand at the pinnacle in the world of magicians, you must be rated first or second class; there are no exceptions. But, at the high school level, to be able to procure this life honor, it is proper and appropriate to say it can turn one’s eyes green with envy—yes, quite appropriate.

The fact is, there weren’t only a few students that might possibly desire the office of Student Council President, but rather quite a lot.

So, why was there only one single candidate?

That was, naturally, the power of human agencies being put in motion.

Tatsuya just now, (with a glance) rested his eyes on the current Student Council President whose guiltless face was tilting up at him in inquiry.

What the heck kind of face would she make if some kind of opposition went around ‘propagandizing’ that the election should not take place?

Probably, making this kind of enticing smile.

Enough of that; the imagination clearly produces some scary scenarios.

“Hmm, unfortunately, this time there is only A-chan… but in general, before the vote of confidence, a ‘vote for me’ speech is made to the

audience. Do you think that will be enough to fire everyone up, tomorrow?”

With only one candidate, calling it a ‘vote for me’ speech wasn’t quite correct, but Tatsuya wasn’t in the habit of making digs like that.

His gaze drifted to a corner of the room. It was well into the noon hour. Azusa’s earnest face was peering at a document and a soft voice was making mumbling sounds.

She wasn’t using a handheld terminal display; she was making a point to read from actual paper documents. She certainly looked like she had the proper fighting spirit of a candidate.

By the way, the “reward” of the flying device had already been given when she accepted her nomination.

A girl like her wasn’t drawn by the promise of rewards; rewards given in advance put her under more pressure, as a result of lingering tension.

And so, as he intended, Azusa had become a prisoner of a strange sense of obligation. Even though she didn’t have an opposing candidate, she was whipping herself with “I’ve got to win, I’ve got to win”.

Probably, even after the speech was over, this tension would keep her will firm.

There wasn’t anything to worry about on this side of things.

“No matter what you think, the main problem is the Student Body General Meeting, right?”

There was no way she could hear his thoughts, but Suzune had given voice to the very issue he had been on the verge of considering. Suzune had been gazing at her desktop terminal display for some time now (it seemed like she was skipping lunch today). Her eyes were going up and down, probably scrolling over a text while reading, possibly reading it over and over, checking everything.

“The special meeting in the spring cut down a degree of grandstanding. We don’t want another mess like that, right now.”

Mari pointed that out as she closed her bento box.

“I certainly have no intention of causing a mess like that.”

Mayumi answered as she, too, cleaned up.

“I am a bit worried by the possibility of violence breaking out, but that’s probably an irrational worry.”

As everyone prepared their tea, Miyuki said that with a smiling face and an air of making a joke. At this time,

“A surprise attack? Well, the students at our school should know better than to attack a girl like her.”

Mari entered into the pause.

“Oh my, how rude. Taking on a girl, don’t you think that’s just awful.”

A smile that said clearly 'that was a joke' was painted on Mayumi’s face and could be seen by Tatsuya when she threw out her remark. There were no opponents who would dare challenge her in a battle of magic, at least no one powerful enough to do so would make a cowardly sneak attack. Mayumi held this conviction, firmly.

“I see… I don’t think taking precautions would be excessive.”

However, Tatsuya’s reply went in a slightly strange direction she was not expecting.

“Uh?”

“Because the president is a girl, moreover a beautiful girl.”

“Re-Really?”

Mayumi rebuffed the remark wearing the composure of an older person, but it could not be said she did very smoothly, as her eyes showed excitement.

On the other hand, Miyuki had a petulant face that said why did my brother blurt out something like that, and appeared to be examining him closely for other signs of infidelity.

“What do you mean? Why did you say something like that so suddenly?”

Miyuki wasn’t the only one who suspected him of infidelity.

The one who tackled her suspicions head on was Mari.

“Suddenly? A portion of the students are trying to rally approval to demolish the president’s plan. I thought we were discussing threats that could disturb the status quo?”

“A rumor of something like that has reached my ears as well…”

Mari replied in a way that seemed somewhat confused. From Tatsuya's perspective, the opposition group was skillfully maneuvering. He judged the intelligence reports with a greater degree of accuracy than Mari, because individual committee members did not normally do intelligence gathering.

“For the opposition group, the only days left to strike are today and tomorrow. President… it would be better if you never let yourself be alone today.”

“Ha-ha, Tatsuya-kun. Aren’t you being a little melodramatic?”

Mayumi took Tatsuya’s outburst as a joke and dismissed it with a laugh. But that did not go over well.

“Have you gotten hold of some intel…?”

With a knitted forehead Mari questioned Tatsuya who wasn’t acting like he was joking with Mayumi.

“Unfortunately, no. If I had gotten a hold of something I would feel more secure.”

“You’re not thinking about it too much, are you?”

“Ha-ha, maybe I am?”

When Suzune pointed out it could be just nerves, Tatsuya lightly laughed in agreement.

Nonetheless, that was merely a pretense, that was clear to anyone with eyes.

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“Tatsuya-kun.”

Only a little time remained of the noon break. Mari, who had just left the Student Council room and was in a nearby corridor, called out in order to stop Tatsuya, who was on his way back to his classroom.

Tatsuya and Miyuki simultaneously turned around; for some reason Mari wore a slightly bitter smile. The general public might think of them as ‘close siblings’, but that was because they were not always ignoring these little actions.

“Do you need something?”

Tatsuya nodded to Mari to continue, in order to quickly dispose of the matter.

“There’s a matter I wish to have a short discussion with you about. Could you come to headquarters?”

When she said ‘headquarters’, he didn’t have to ask of what; she meant the Public Moral Committee headquarters.

“Right now?”

“It won’t take much time. Oh, yes. If possible, could Shiba also be present?”

Tatsuya and Miyuki's faces, struck by surprise, looked at each other. This was the first time in their memory that Mari had said to Miyuki anything like ‘need you to do something’ or ‘something to discuss’.

“Miyuki, are you okay time wise?”

“Yes. Since fourth period is free, there’s no problem if I’m a little late.”

Free was an abbreviation for ‘free subject’. Science, language, and the like or magic other than actual practice could be studied by terminals for individual study. It was about the same as self study, so being a little late was certainly no problem.

“Is it alright with Onii-sama?”

Tatsuya on the other hand, had a small test on practical skill that was called ‘ability measurement’.

In the first course, an instructor used an instrument to process measurement (naturally, advice was also given), but in the second course, students individually, at their own convenience, used an instrument to process measurement; as long as it was sometime during the period he made the requisite score, it would be counted as a passing grade.

“—It’s okay.”

He nodded to Miyuki and directed an agreement to Mari; Mari said ‘sorry’, outpaced the two of them and advanced on foot to the stairs.

As they went to their committee’s headquarters, they did not use the shortcut that passed by the Student Council room.

Compared to half a year before, she was like a different person; it certainly seemed like a different room after all the cleaning and organizing he’d done. By the receiver set that wasn’t there half a year before, Mari and the siblings sat down facing across from each other. (By the way, the receiver set, as he had found out through cross-examination, had been moved to a storehouse because the room had been filled with so much stuff. It had been returned to its original spot so that they could monitor information frequencies.)

“—Okay, now, since it’s you two siblings, perhaps you have some idea of what this is about.”

At the emphasis made by Mari with her preface, Tatsuya thought “Huh?”

A subtle tension was radiating from her.

Unthinkable; Miyuki’s here so it can’t be that kind of reason. They came face to face in the Student Council room regularly. You couldn’t call the opportunities for them to have words nil; there was no reason for an upperclassman like Mari to feel tense at this point in their relationship.

“…What I want to discuss, it’s Mayumi. The truth is, I, too, am gripped by anxiety from what Tatsuya pointed out earlier.”

“The matter of those who oppose the plan to abolish the rule about Student Council members having to be chosen from Course One students?”

Mari didn’t notice due to her tension, but Tatsuya indicated his understanding.

“That’s right… I, too, think that there are too many people in the opposition party. At the spring assembly, I did not feel that kind of mood from the people opposed when the announcement was made, but I believe I can remember that the people who made emotionally opposing outbursts were… more than a few. Since you’re both first years, you may not think about this kind of thing, but you can’t conduct a sabotage operation peacefully. After all, won’t somebody who runs around using violence always pop out? That is what is called sufficient warning.”

“Most likely.”

The one who thought that was Tatsuya, who was without hesitation or hatred and swiftly directed towards the gloomy faced Mari.

“Mayumi—probably because she is an ojou-sama[12], is unfamiliar with this kind of ‘malice’. That girl probably cannot understand the feeling that is said to make a cornered animal attack.”

Hmmm, Tatsuya agreed that it was a suicidal weakness.

Mari didn’t appear to be the bashful type.

Seen from the sidelines, it was abundantly clear that these two’s playful badgering was proof of how well they got along; from Tatsuya’s perspective, Mari worrying about Mayumi was ‘utterly natural’. However, Mari did not seem to think so.

“What you said just then… Mayumi seems to have not taken it too seriously. Because Mayumi has the special skill ‘Multi Scope’, that girl can guard her perimeter and nobody can take her by surprise, but since that ability is not a passive activation perception ability, when she doesn’t feel the need for vigilance, it’s like a toy trapped in its packaging.”

“…Hmm.”

Well, isn’t it about time Mari tells us what she wants us to do, Tatsuya thought.

“Eh— then, …sorry. I'm chattering without getting to the point…”

Good, Tatsuya didn’t have to say it aloud; Mari was returning to the main issue on her own.

“And so. I want you two to… if you could, leave school with Mayumi today for me?”

“—You mean see the president home?”

“You don’t have to go as far as her home—no, I’d be grateful if you would go that far. I think I don’t have to worry about her inside school grounds. In the classrooms, she’s surrounded by a crowd of groupies; in the Student Council room, there’s Ichihara and Hattori. The time I’m most worried about is when she leaves school. She won’t, for whatever the reason, let her groupies approach her outside of school.”

“Isn’t that because she is a direct descendant of the Ten Master Clans?”

Mari made a face that said ‘until now, I’ve never considered that’ when Tatsuya made his absent-minded assertion.

“…It’s like that?”

“Eh? I’m not a member of the Ten Master Clans; that was but a simple guess.”

“You might be right on the mark… Anyway, Mayumi generally leaves school alone. Even if someone made it look accidental, it would be easier than within school. If it wasn’t this point in time, I’d be talking to Hattori, but after he’s done with the Student Council, it seems that he goes over to the Club Management Group’s area to make various preparations… Under the circumstances, Tatsuya-kun, I’d like to rely on you. Since you possess the strongest anti-magic ‘Gram Demolition’, no matter what sneak attack they contrive, it will be okay, right?”

Tatsuya was gripped by a single doubt; however, he couldn't speak the words. Because, faster than he could open his mouth, Miyuki answered Mari’s question.

“Please leave it to us. If it’s my brother, there will be no slip-ups.”

Mari’s last utterance had not been a question as a formality, however. In actuality, it was a provocation, or perhaps an incitement. The words oddly stirred up Miyuki—they were for the purpose of inciting her to burst into the pause and keep mean-spirited Tatsuya’s questions like ‘Why should I, myself, have to accompany her away from school?’ from being spoken.

Instead, Tatsuya was looking at Mari who had a smirking evil grin.

“Wh-What? Is there something you want to say?”

“No, not particularly.”

“How mean spirited. If that girl got injured now, various things would worsen. In spite of understanding how precarious things are… it’s not as if I’m particularly worried about that girl.”

As he watched Mari make excuses with all her might, Tatsuya thought ‘so is this what is called a tsundere[13]?’ — he wasn’t quite certain.

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“—Thanks for your hard work. With this, all the preparations for tomorrow should be complete?”

In response to Mayumi’s closing pleasantries,

“Yes, the documents are all in order.”

By Azusa.

“The president has also completed her check.”

Hattori affirmed in a calm tone.

However Hattori did not simply make an answer to the question; his words were apologetic and contrite as he continued.

“…President, this is actually painful for you?”

“Yes, Hanzou-kun, thank you for your work. I’m already finished here, so don’t worry.”

After this, he had the formal investiture over at the Club Management Group. That was something Mayumi understood as well.

“Excuse me, President…”

“I said it’s okay. If A-chan is ready too, please leave.”

With great pain, Hattori regretfully gathered his things hurriedly, made a rapid “pardon me” as a goodbye to Azusa, put the Student Council behind him and went towards the preparation building.

“It’s time for you to leave too, Miyuki.”

In a similar tone, Mayumi directed her comment at Miyuki, who for some reason hadn't even got up from her seat, although both second years had gone home (to be correct, Azusa was the only one who had gone home).

"If it is alright, I wish to wait here for a little longer."

However, what was sent back as an answer was rather unusual from Miyuki.

"Tatsuya-kun?"

"Yeah. Seems like he's somewhere a phone signal can't reach, since I can't contact him."

"Somewhere a phone signal can't reach…"

"Couldn't it be the basement archives?"

Suzune whispered into the ear of Mayumi, who had tilted her head questioningly (although I called it that, the volume was such that it reached all the way over to Miyuki). Mayumi assented with an "uh, huh" look.

"That privacy barrier… is sometimes thick, since you certainly can't contact him… alright."

"I'm going to tidy up a bit more and then leave. Oh, Rin-chan, go home already. You have an errand you can't get out of today, right?"

"…Yeah. I'm sorry, President."

"It's okay. I'll let you off today, so work hard tomorrow."

Mayumi has no inkling, huh; there was no trace of doubt in her reply. She even let loose a light laugh. Suzune bowed without a word.

The Student Council room was down to the two of them; Mayumi and Miyuki turned to their desks in silence.

After a short period, at what Mayumi felt was just about the right length, the authorized person (in short, people whose student IDs

were registered with the room’s verification system) arrival notice beep rang.

Miyuki arose and aimed her eye at the door.

“Sorry I made you wait.”

Miyuki’s anticipation was not in vain; Tatsuya entered the room.

“No, you haven’t done anything like that.”

As she watched Miyuki joyfully headed towards him with small, quick steps, Mayumi let loose a slightly surprised laugh.

“I’m used to it already but… you two are really close.”

“Oh, President. You’re by yourself?"

“Abandoned ship… but that’s okay. Yes, the only ones left today are Miyuki and I.”

Since he was also used to Mayumi, her impudence didn’t throw Tatsuya’s pace off. It was her usual light-hearted repartee.

“Shall we help you?”

“How unusual.”

However, her next words seemed to show actual genuine surprise.

“I wonder if snow might fall[14], too.”

“It’s impossible for me, but… my sister would have no difficulty. Miyuki, the president appears to desire snow.”

“Acknowledged. Well then, how much shall I make, Onii-sama?”

“Let’s see… if you pile it up to 10 centimeters, shouldn’t that be enough?”

“Wait! St-stop! It’s okay if snow doesn’t fall!”

At first she thought it was a joke so she had left it alone, but their expressions were far too serious. Spurred by a worry called “it’s a

10,000 to 1 that they'll actually do it but, what if they do", Mayumi frantically halted things.

"Good grief… Don't tell jokes with a straight face."

"Wasn't it only natural that it was a joke?"

To Tatsuya, who wasn't offering either a sweet smile or a broad grin as verification, Mayumi directed a look filled with defenselessness (trust) with all her might. However, she saw a complete lack of effect and simply shrugged her shoulders to say "oh, well".

She, too, seemed extremely used to Tatsuya's ways. —They were on equal footing.

"Let's stop kidding around."

Mayumi watched him with a penetrating look, but Tatsuya naturally ignored it.

"It's going to get dark before long, but if there's any remaining work, we'll help you."

The calendar had already passed the fall equinox. "It's going to get dark before long" was no exaggeration in any way.

For now (?) she would take Tatsuya's altruistic words at face value (maybe she "misunderstood" him); Mayumi's face relaxed.

"Um… I'd better go home, too. Thank you for your concern."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Then President, why don't we go to the station together?"

Thinking that Tatsuya would be readily shot down, this time Miyuki made an attempt.

While she was thinking that this was also an unusual occurrence, Mayumi's face spontaneously broke out in a smile.

"Why don't we all work together?"

“Since it’s already so late, I know it will take some time to get the documents from ‘underground’, so the first thing to do is to go now, so they can finish it for us before they go home.”

“…Now that you mention it, what were you searching for in the archives?”

“I was searching for ancient texts related to ‘the philosopher’s stone[15], because the significant texts haven’t been transcribed into the database.”

“…An extremely crackpot, no, specialized research subject.”

“I think it could be a tool to compensate lack of ability.”

“Is, is that…?”

Without thinking, he shocked Mayumi with his genuine motive.

“…Uh, how can a magician who can use ‘Gram Demolition’ say such a thing? Even if that was the only magic you could use, you’d still be in high demand by police and defense force from here and there.”

Nevertheless her face rapidly swelled with disappointment.

Tatsuya was well aware that Mayumi thought he held a warped opinion of his own magic talents. None the less, the tenor of his thoughts were slightly different from the common ‘feelings of the reserves’; ‘the reserve students’ were only fed up about the social system placing limits on their opportunities because they were reserves that he well knew.

He had unconsciously forgotten that if he said anything that sounded a little self pitying, Mayumi, who somehow always had the upper hand with him, would get angry.

He might not attain high rank as international standards determined magicians rank, but if you considered public (occupational) requirements, talented people like him who held the technical skill to excel in a specialized field were in great demand.

“Hey, Tatsuya-kun, I think you shouldn’t emphasize yourself that you are a ‘reserve student’ so much. Because you are simply being melodramatic, you’ll be remembered for your achievements… If you continue in that vein, you’ll be the envy of both the first course and second course students.”

“I do not intend to emphasize that point.”

For Tatsuya, when he named himself ‘reserve student’, he truly did it with neither the intention of satisfying masochistic tendencies, nor to be melodramatic. Just now, he had been asked (indirectly) for the reason he was investigating this subject and he only answered that question. —Naturally, he did not lie in order to conceal his true intentions; the real reason he was investigating matters related to ‘the philosopher’s stone’ was to compensate lack of ability to do certain things regarding his goal to build a ‘Gravity Control-Type Magic Thermonuclear Fusion Reactor’.

In any case, Tatsuya had no intention of emphasizing to himself that he was just a ‘reserve student’.

However,

“…Never mind, I’ll try not to.”

In the end, he answered thus.

It wasn’t like Tatsuya couldn’t understand that Mayumi was worrying about him.

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The three of them, Mayumi and the siblings, walked the straight path from the school entrance to the station they usually took with Erika, Leo, and the rest of their friends. Miyuki was a little nervous; well, that was understandable. Even Mayumi might feel she had to be pleasant out of nervousness. Her bag was held in both hands in front

of her body. The manner in which she walked in silence with her eyes concealing her feelings had a grace that caused one to wonder “From which high class family did this ojou-sama hail from?” —In actuality, Mayumi was an ojou-sama.

Tatsuya himself didn't have any topic he cared to sponsor for conversation. ‘The art of small talk’ was one he was especially unskilled at. Additionally, he was now on alert for attacks from the opposition group. For that reason, the three of them hardly made any conversation as about 70 percent of the distance to the station evaporated.

“…Hey, Tatsuya-kun.”

“What is it?”

Because of those circumstances, when Mayumi unexpectedly spoke, Tatsuya was practically ready for anything.

“Isn’t it true that the two of you waited for me so we could leave together?”

However, even though he was prepared, he was surprised by her comment.

When Tatsuya did not immediately respond with a reply, Mayumi continued on as if she had received a one syllable reply.

“Mari said something, didn’t she? Something like since the opposition group may attack, walk me to my house.”

“…You know her well, President.”

The one who answered truthfully was not Tatsuya, it was Miyuki. Mayumi’s insight had led her to make a guess that shot through the deception right to the truth; at least, Miyuki could verbally intervene so Tatsuya wouldn’t have to explain why (?) ‘he confessed’.

“It’s okay.”

Mayumi smiled slightly as she turned to Miyuki.

“I won’t tell Mari that I wormed the truth out of you two.”

Miyuki nodded out of embarrassment upon having her intentions being completely and readily laid bare.

“But, why did you speak of it?”

On the other hand, Tatsuya did not show any special discomfort on his face, nor did he speak with any trace of what could be called defiance; he merely asked with a puzzled look.

“To get you to understand that you didn’t need to walk me all the way home. Oh, don’t misunderstand me. I’m not annoyed or anything like that.”

Tatsuya mutely bowed his head and signaled her to continue.

“Didn’t Mari say something like I generally take the path to and from school without precautions? But, I don’t leave with everybody else as a precaution, so if something happens, nobody else will get caught up in it.”

“By that… you don’t mean only at times like this?”

“Yes, I may be only calling myself this, but because I am an ‘ojou-sama’, I am often targeted by people with monetary or political goals and stuff like that.”

She said the word ojou-sama without any traces of pride in the tone of her voice, only self-depreciation colored her tone.

“Because the Saegusa family is a noble clan that, since the formation of the ten master clans system, has never fallen from the ranks, not even once.”

Tatsuya spoke with ‘there’s nothing that can be done about it’ implicit in his words; Mayumi made a pained smile.

“…Well, that’s how it is. Because I’ve been trained to never slack off on taking precautions, I am always prepared so that I can invoke my magic.”

She raised her left hand. The sleeve slipped down to reveal her CAD; it was not in rest mode, it was in standby mode.

“Besides, I also have a bodyguard.”

“Uh, really?”

Miyuki franticly looked around, but she could not find a trace of anybody who looked like a bodyguard.

“…He’s waiting at the station.”

Mayumi subtly halted the search.

“As you might surmise, it is embarrassing to walk the road to school accompanied by a bodyguard.”

Even if she did say it herself, it did not change the fact that it was embarrassing.

“Oh, so that’s why she said something like ‘You don’t have to see her to her house’… Since once you got to the station, the bodyguard would be waiting.”

Upon hearing this, Tatsuya’s face showed he finally understood.

“That’s right.”

However, now that that was explained, something new pricked his curiosity.

“But, why have you explained this to us?”

He knew it was a pointless question, but Tatsuya couldn’t dampen his curiosity. If what she just said was true (although it seemed there was no reason to lie), Mari was also aware of this private personal information.

“Ye-es… maybe I just wanted to walk home with Tatsuya-kun and Miyuki-san?”

However, looking on the bashful face of Mayumi as she answered, Tatsuya felt a premonition of ‘utter failure…’

“Me, too?”

Miyuki didn’t feel the same premonition as her brother, so Mayumi sent a (elder sister) smile in the direction of her tilted head.

“Yes. Last autumn, I became Student Council President; the first half year has been fulfilling in itself, but this past half year, for me, has been a really fulfilling period."

And then she switched her gaze to Tatsuya.

“And that has surely been thanks to you two.”

“…I think you are overrating us, but…”

As Tatsuya refuted her claim expressionlessly, Mayumi laughed and giggled wholeheartedly.

“I’ve only recently come to understand this, but… Tatsuya-kun, you are a modest person.”

Watching Tatsuya become so lost on how to respond that his face hardened into a noh mask, Mayumi let out a stream of ‘insuppressible’ high pitched giggles.

“Is this how you act your age? Sometimes, I feel like I’m actually dealing with a ten year old?”

With the exception of Mayumi, Tatsuya’s acquaintances, who occasionally cast doubt about his actual age, all estimated higher; the only thing he could do was sink into silence with an astonished look on his face.

Mayumi’s vision blurred with tears—she laughed so much, she wiped her eyes with her fingers and directed a cheerful face to the siblings.

“…A-chan and Hanzou-kun are very good kids, but you two siblings are surely the most memorable of all my wonderful high school kouhai.”

Her face lit up with an extraordinary bright smile, Miyuki was also struck speechless.

In a completely different manner than her brother, whose ears were burning.

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The Shiba house, since their father stayed at their step-mother's place, was actually the house of the two siblings, Tatsuya and Miyuki; for a private residence, it was on the large side. It was not as palatial as the Kitayama house or the Saegusa house (Tatsuya and Miyuki had not actually seen either of those); compared to those, it was only on the level of a private residence.

Although, you couldn't quite call it a mere private residence.

Buried underneath, there was a magic engineering research facility that was as high tech as a university research lab. (For some reason or other, it's appearance was somewhat secret hideout-ish, but it was simply a basement that has the same floor space as the floor above it remodeled into a laboratory.)

The Tatsuya who came out of that basement laboratory into the living room above it had an unusually tired appearance; his body sank deep into the sofa.

He used his thumb and middle finger to strongly massage his temple; he rotated his head once, twice.

In that state, he looked at the ceiling and put his thoughts in order.

His mind was boiling with idle thoughts about his memories of the events that took place at dusk, today.

He was thinking about the bodyguard he was introduced to when he took Mayumi to the station.

Mayumi's guard was unexpectedly male.

Tatsuya had believed that a guard for a girl around Mayumi's age would undoubtedly be female; to be truthful, he was pretty surprised. The man was an older gentleman well into his fifties; there might not be any hint of indecency, but…

The impression the middle aged man gave off was not that of a bodyguard, but rather of a butler, and more like a grandfather than a butler. However, his spine was as straight as a pin, his body was thin but firm; that he was definitely on 'active duty' was clearly understood from one glance. He did not carry himself in any special stance but there was a polished politeness to him; he had experience of military service, moreover it was a long service in various areas. The fact that he was used to wearing a uniform seeped through his stance.

This sort of body wasn't unusual; the past century had seen many wars, especially as the end of the 21st century, so veterans of military service were so common that if foolish people tried to maintain a civilization without them, it would be a shamble. Former military personnel, who are also magicians using the mixture of their experiences and technical skills to get a place with a respectable family as bodyguards, was also common; the point that was troubling had nothing to do with that.

The point that was weighing on Tatsuya's mind was the bodyguard's name; to be exact, his family name.

"Onii-sama, you're not asleep yet?"

He turned his eyes in the direction the voice came from; Miyuki was standing in the doorway of the living room wearing pink pajamas.

"Miyuki, what about you; why are you still awake? Tomorrow… no, it's probably already today. You have to be a speaker at the meeting, right?"

Miyuki served as the program director in today's campaign speech portion of the assembly. Each year, this was the job given to the first years' representative on the Student Council.

“My throat was a little dry…”

The scolding of ‘go to bed early’ was unsaid but still felt by Miyuki. As she made her excuse timidly, she could feel Tatsuya rolling his eyes.

“If that’s so, it can’t be helped.”

Always inclined to spoil his sister rotten, Tatsuya agreed with an ironic sounding laugh.

Just now, her face shining with sweat, Miyuki came to Tatsuya’s side with a speed that was close to sprinting.

To the question in his sister's eyes, her brother answered 'yes' with his eyes.

Miyuki, with a happy smile, sat down next to Tatsuya.

Slowly, the season was turning and the nights were getting colder, but Miyuki’s pajamas were made for summer. It had short sleeves and the pants were ¾ length; the cloth was lightweight and the lines of her body could be dimly perceived through it. It wasn’t the kind of thing a girl should wear late at night alone with a man, but Tatsuya didn’t dare say anything. —The words to speak, he himself silenced; he got the feeling that if he said anything, he’d be digging his own grave.

“What were you thinking about?”

Did she know what Tatsuya was thinking or didn’t she? Miyuki brought her playful face near his as she asked.

He was aware that it was a bit unsuitable to discuss such a heavy topic to someone wearing such an innocent face; none the less, due to his extreme tiredness, Tatsuya just answered truthfully.

“Well……about Saegusa-senpai’s bodyguard; it has been nagging at me?”

Faster than Tatsuya could think “aw, nuts”, Miyuki’s smile left her face in a flash.

“About Nakura-san’s name?”

Mayumi had introduced the older gentleman as Nakura Saburou.

“The matter nagging at Onii-sama, could it be… the Extra?”

She could read him so well that she could see the single word he was thinking about; Tatsuya released a painful smile. If Miyuki hadn’t been thinking about that possibility, she wouldn’t have been able to read him so well. However, more than being aware of it, Tatsuya thought she probably also felt the significance he placed on the matter.

“I thought it unthinkable, but… one of the ten master clans employing a guard for the sake of a child of the family who is not the heir. If they’re not able to give them assumed family names the way we do, then I think they won’t be able to get rid of them as ‘Extras’.”

“I don’t think any of the other family aside from the Yotsuba clan has its members live under aliases, but…”

“We don’t know that. The other families don’t know Yotsuba customs and we’re the same. The other nine families, the eighteen additional families, that is 27 families in all that Yotsuba is unable to know the family traditions of.”

“But… the degree of difference from oba-ue[16], Saegusa, which is weighed down with all that prestige, is willing to employ an ‘Extra’ in such a confidential position as a guard to the eldest daughter of the main family?”

“Perhaps because it is the prestigious Saegusa, they might be showing off that they don’t practice discrimination for the prestige it gives them.”

“I see… that is certainly another way of thinking about it…”

Suujiochi—Extra numbers, referred to by the abbreviation. Extra; magicians or their descendants that have been stripped of their family ‘number’.

The reasons for stripping off their number could be from such causes as: the crime of treason, the crime of failure to perform an important duty, and ‘incompetence’.

When Magicians became a symbol of military power, magicians were given numbers as a ‘a mark of their success’, but those who did not achieve results worthy of ‘a mark of their success’ were branded as failures due to their lack; they were extras.

Nowadays, the name of “Extra”, itself, is officially prohibited from being used. In the community of magicians, discriminating against someone for being an ‘Extra’ is a grave illegal act.

However, like discrimination against course 2 students at magic high schools, this has not been exterminated and is still being practiced. It has even worsened and is in the process of becoming a severe problem; this invisible glass ceiling of discrimination against ‘Extras’ still persists.

In Tatsuya’s generation, there might be many people unaware that their family name indicated that they were descended from an ‘Extra’, because their parents hid it from them. It was that deeply rooted prejudice would cause them to be regarded as ‘failure’ and ‘defective merchandise’, and that would be inserted into their consciousness as magicians.

Therefore, if Nakura was a descendant of a stripped family named Nana[17]kura, then for what purpose did it serve the Saegusa family head to employ him as a bodyguard for his daughter, this was what was weighing on Tatsuya’s mind.

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A little while before…

The time is when only three hours remain before the date changes, in a magnificent bath house set nearby the main residence of the Saegusa family, which can be described as a ‘a grand mansion’.

Nothing about it does not fit that image without exaggeration, but far from the prying eyes of passersby, Mayumi was comfortably submerged in the magnificent bath tub full of hot water, lightly sighing as she examined her own body critically.

—Her proportions weren't that bad, even if that was only her own opinion.

—Her height, well after all, she did stop growing in her third year of middle school, but her little sisters also had petite bodies; there was nothing to be done but resign herself to her genetic heritage.

A sha-bum sound arose; Mayumi stretched her arms and legs out of the hot water.

—She was often told at boutiques and beauty salons that her limbs were quite long for someone as small in stature as she.

Arms and legs were returned to the bath; her hand brushed her breast gently.

—Her chest was also called large in proportion to height; no matter what type of clothes she wore, there was never tightness at the waist.

—She was quite sexy, even if that was only her own opinion.

—But when she faced 'Her', no matter how well she thought of herself, her confidence in herself wavered.

In her own mind, she always referred to the girl by the pronoun 'Her or She'; in the realm of her unconscious mind, the proper noun of 'Shiba Miyuki' transformed.

—Until she met Her, she had never seen a girl so beautiful.

—Even Her arms and legs; so slim, so slender, so fine without looking unhealthy.

—Her waist, too, rested on that fine edge; Her chest and breast areas were full of feminine curves.

—Most of all, the number of perfectly symmetrical features was overwhelming. In the first place, even though internal organs in general are arranged symmetrically, no matter how perfectly symmetrical a person’s body is, her appearance will not likewise be symmetrical.

Even so, compared to non-magicians, the number of magicians with highly symmetrical bodies is higher. Aside from personal appearance, there is an easily seen tendency for people who have a strong disposition for magic to have a highly symmetrical bone structure; Mayumi was well aware of this knowledge.

—For that reason, there are times when Mayumi doubts that She was a flesh and blood person.

—Or even see Her as a girl like herself.

—Mayumi believed that the boy who was Her elder brother was unfortunately unable to see any other girl as anything but a poor copy of Her.

—Her elder brother.

Mayumi, once again, sighed without realizing it.

—He was to the point that it made Mayumi doubt that they were actually related by blood, ordinary in his exterior.

—There was nothing particularly wrong with him.

—However, he was at the most, only ‘so-so’.

Mayumi submerged herself in the bathtub up to her nose. The water started foaming as her breath turned into bubbles. Did the air in the bubbles come from sighing or breathing, even Mayumi didn’t know.

—Nevertheless, his interior was far from ordinary.

—Rather than calling it superior, non-standard fit better.

—Through lots of time and labor, scholars around the world took their accumulated knowledge, bundled it up, and constructed the current rating system for magicians.

—His existence questioned the validity of that system.

—Even by rounding up, he was only C-rank by international standards.

—In spite of that, all the actual results that she and others had seen for themselves exceeded those of an A-rank magician.

She lifted her face out of the bath, took a deep breath. She exhaled twice, thrice; Mayumi lightly laughed.

—The Staff Room should be racking their brains.

—What, with a system that stood for decades was being fundamentally challenged, and the plan to create both a ‘Magic’ and ‘Magic Engineering Department’ as well, the status quo of the staff room was being heavily shaken.

Mayumi gave a wry smile as she shook her head from side to side.

—Nevertheless, his existence was impossible.

—If only his intelligence and knowledge were superior, he wouldn’t be able to cause this much confusion.

—A first year high school student capable of using a high level anti-magic which had almost no practitioners.

—After being hit with magic that should cause critical wounds to his body, he calmly resumed fighting.

—The smashing of the terrorist group, she had heard was actually done by his power alone.

—His ability to use magic and his ability to fight with magic were too uneven.



—No, even if only his knowledge were considered, it could be argued that some alterations to the curriculum should be made?

The hot water was warm enough. In spite of that, Mayumi's body shivered as if from cold. While she knew the chill she felt wasn't radiating from her skin, Mayumi submerged her body deeply in the bathtub.

—Today, when she introduced him to Nakura, she didn't tell him, but it was a type of test.

—A test to see if he realized what the name "Na-Ku-Ra" meant.

—At the time she spoke the name, Nakura, for one moment—and really it was only for one brief moment—turmoil ran through his eyes; it was only due to focusing her complete and total powers of observation on him that allowed her to not miss it.

—He was aware of the meaning of "Na-Ku-Ra".

—Only people like Juumonji and herself, who were well versed in the "darkness" of modern magic, would know the meaning.

—An ordinary magician, he was not.

—A magician from some negligible family, he was not.

—"Shi-Ba" Tatsuya. Shi, a pronunciation of the kanji[18] that meant chief; Ba, a pronunciation of the kanji that meant leaves. Shi, a syllable that could also mean four; Ba, leaves. Yotsu, a pronunciation of the kanji that meant four; Ba, leaves. Yotsuba.

—Could it be, could he also be, could he possibly be an "Extra".

Her brain on fire, Mayumi considered it.

## Chapter 4

Since morning, the school grounds had been covered by a buoyant atmosphere.

Today, no classes would be held in the afternoon; the Student Body General Meeting, the Campaign Speeches, and the election were being held instead.

In modern high schools, where individual classes almost never assembled, this was a very big event.

Not only that, in this Student Body General Meeting, a proposal to make a major alteration to the system of student government was supposed to be made.

As a matter of fact, since before summer vacation, a conflict between the proponent group and the opposition group had been brewing under the surface of school life.

Whether it was due to the current president Saegusa Mayumi's popularity, the difficulty of publicly opposing the proposal, or the influence of the actions of the Second Course team in the Monolith Code event at the newcomers tournament, in terms of numbers, the proponent group was overwhelming. However, in response to that, the opposition group had grown more obstinate. People who examined the current state of affairs felt that there was a violent undertone; this made the mood of the school rife with unrest.

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"Everyone here? This is the final check for station deployment."

After morning classes finished, all the members of the Public Moral Committee assembled at committee headquarters.

Since they worked in shifts and most of them operated solo, having all the committee members together was rare. The Student Body General Meeting was one of the few times all members would be out in force.

“In general, the committee will be stationed inside of the lecture hall. Outside the lecture hall, the automated surveillance cameras will be used. We are here to help the student government.”

The entire force of the Public Moral Committee was nine people. Since this was all that was available to police the 560 members of the student body accumulated in the meeting room, they didn’t have any guards to spare for handling the exterior. Still, even if they did have enough people, dealing with villainous intruders wasn’t part of their job.

“Chiyoda and I are at the main entrance; at the side entrance, Tatsumi and Morisaki…”

While listening to Mari’s directions, Tatsuya thought she‘s “unusually intense”. Instead of using feminine speech, she’s sounding quite boyish. Well, for the Public Moral Committee, this was a rare opportunity to assemble.

“Sawaki is on the upper part of the platform, Shiba is on the lower part; that’s all.”

Mari barked out the members’ names and posts in order to confirm them.

His own station was the stage wing.

In case the official on stage was attacked, or as it was called, “got jumped”, he and Sawaki were the so-called last line of defense… but Tatsuya didn’t really have to worry about that.

After yesterday’s walk with Mayumi, he understood. No student at First High School would be reckless enough to harm Mayumi. What he meant was that it was reckless to try to harm Mayumi at First High School, and every male upperclassman would make sure everyone knew it…

“Everyone, quickly man your post. Shiba, stay for a bit.”

When it was just the two of them, Mari reverted to her usual way of speaking.

“Make it quick; Tatsuya-kun, how did it go yesterday?”

He didn’t need to ask her to explain what she was asking about.

“Attacked, three times.”

Mari’s face quickly froze.

“I was.”

However, as she heard his following words, her expression only showed “Huh?”

“No, it seems I’ve been gazing at the president a little too warmly.”

“…Don’t worry about the time; just give me an explanation?”

“To be brief, they seemed to be members of her fan club.”

As she heard Tatsuya's calm words of explanation, her face changed to comprehension.

“In short, misplaced jealousy.”

“You would think it would be obvious that it was not that kind of situation since Miyuki was with us.”

Remembering yesterday’s events, (an emotional) wave of fatigue rolled over him. At least, that’s the way it felt to Tatsuya.

“Well, only activate your CADs; don’t put the thought of doing something more tangible out of your head, but if you do something stupid, you will incur more than just the president’s wrath.”

“Got it…”

“In that condition, if we are caught in a crossfire, we might be unable to interfere… Because if the president receives a single blow, I see a problem occurring if we try to gang up on someone.”

Even fanatics didn’t want to die in vain. Suicide bombers carried out their plans in order to take their enemies (and their allies) with them. Snipers did not plan to strike from places they could be spotted, or at places that were known to be protected by bulletproof glass.

The two of them felt stupid for worrying over nothing, and shared relieved smiles.

…After all that, Tatsuya’s enthusiasm for his work approached zero level.

With the belief that he had been taking things so seriously that he had been seeing shadows, he took his place—standing at the side of the stage beside the stairs for the main event.

When he thought about it, it was obvious that it was only a matter of a high school government election. Even if the prestige of “Student Council President” had any real meaning, the titles of ‘vice president’, ‘secretary’ and the like carried no real meaning after graduation.

In the First High School’s system, if the Student Council President willed it, there could be two vice presidents or four secretaries; Course 2 students not being part of the Student Council wasn't a matter of honor, it was only a matter of pride.

And when it came down to it, it was a pretty petty form of pride.

(His view of the matter had been negatively influenced by “the outside world”…)

For the sake of ideals, for the sake of money, for the sake of honor, for the sake of pride… in the world Tatsuya was deeply immersed in, it was comparatively easy to exchange human life for these things; he had taken things too seriously when they were discussing and evaluating the danger and had forgotten the difference in the “Stage” before his eyes. He felt he had been viewing things in a way unrelated to reality, just as if he had been watching a movie.

“…For the above reason, I propose to dissolve the limitation concerning who can become a member of the Student Council.”

As Mayumi’s explanation of the legislation finished, a hand was suddenly raised from the third years’ row.

Tatsuya had no recollection of this First Course female student (in short, she had not participated in the Nine Schools Competition; she didn’t have enough power to be chosen as a member of the team) who stood at the questioner‘s podium.

Because modern parabolic microphones have the potential to pick up everyday conversation from 50 meters away, it wasn‘t going a little overboard to install a questioner‘s podium.

That small instrument and the big instrument that worked with it were going to gradually take away Tatsuya's sense of how the world should work.

“…This public position… sound argument…”

The words of the questioner, a part of the so-called opposition party, were intermittently failing to reach his ear.

Naturally, he wasn’t wearing earplugs; he unconsciously filtered the speech to only allow words that might induce trouble to enter his consciousness.

“The real issue is whether there is a need to change the system? In short, are there any Course Two students suitable to be part of the Student Council?”

Tatsuya scowled at the questions with clear aims. (There was nothing in the questions themselves that would make a speaker feel that they had to conceal their face from outsiders.)

It was a piece of undisguised good luck. Tatsuya thought that Mayumi answered the questions seriously; he didn’t know what she was thinking or if she was thinking but she answered them.

“Today, I will resign from the post of Student Council President. Accordingly, I cannot appoint new people to the Student Council and so I haven’t thought about who could be appointed.”

“However, you can pressure the next Student Council President into appointing the Course Two student of your own choice?”

(“your own choice” was used…)

Tatsuya felt the expression was extremely suggestive.

“I am not thinking of becoming a hidden empress.”

She gave a slight high pitched giggle as she made her minor jest.

“The right of appointing the next Student Council’s members is one of the powers of the next Student Council President. I have no intention of countermanding any of the next Student Council President’s authority.”

“You mean the next Student Council President who you wish to surround with Course Two students; you mean you haven’t put forth this change in our system at this time with that intention?”

A stir arose in the lecture hall at the poison laced words. It seemed that Tatsuya wasn’t the only one thinking “Hey, now!”

“Quiet, please.”

The icy voice that called out the order was from Miyuki who was helping to keep the program on track.

Since President Mayumi, as the person who raised the issue, was standing in order to handle questions, Hattori was momentarily in charge of keeping things moving and Miyuki was employed as his assistant. (By the way, officially, the speaker could not take a break for food or drink during the Student Body General Assembly.)

“…The answer to that question is ‘no‘. The reason I am advocating the proposal at this time is because this is the only chance to do so. Because I consider it to be the responsibility of the Student Council President to ensure that any enmity among their Kouhai is fully doused and will not erupt into flames.”

Deep in Tatsuya’s heart, a sense of wonder emerged. No matter what, this noble face never seems to be seen outside of an arena like this one.

“The truth of the matter is that the inability of Course Two students to become officers of the Student Council is not a source of antagonism.”

On the other hand, the questioner—whose name was Asano—Tatsuya thought, was becoming more intractable.

“It is not a matter of whether or not there is a candidate, Asano-san. The system reveals the way an organization thinks. The system does not allow Course Two students to become officers of the Student Council; it says that it doesn’t matter how much power an individual Course Two student has, that individual cannot become an officer of the Student Council. This can be interpreted as a declaration from the Student Council that it believes Course Two students are not worthy of the privilege of becoming officers of the Student Council. That is being mistaken for elitism.”

She had put a lot of effort into making that presentation, Tatsuya thought, as the President was wrapped in applause.

It wasn’t coming entirely from the rows of Course Two students.

“This is a subterfuge.”

No matter how thickheaded a person was, they would not be able to keep themselves unaware that the atmosphere that coated the lecture hall was against them. In the midst of this, she was still at it; I suppose it’s unsurprising that Asano’s words have started having a hysterical edge to them.

“Isn’t it because you, President, have a Course Two student you want to place on the Student Council, that you want the qualification annulled! Isn’t your true motive to give someone preferential treatment!”

There was a feeling of desperation to the voices that cried “That’s right” sporadically, but they were immediately drowned by a storm of booing. The storm thrust large waves of discontent against the questioner’s podium.

“President Saegusa! Isn’t your true intent to put that first year student on the Student Council?”

The finger of the hysterically wailing Asano pointed at Tatsuya.

“I know it’s true. You even went as far as the station with him on your way home, yesterday!”

This was probably hopelessness, an outburst of despair.

Asano’s face crumpled.

Nevertheless, those words unexpectedly showed a major result.

The storm of booing instantly abated.

The eyes of the entire student population were going back and forth between Mayumi and Tatsuya.

When he saw Mayumi’s face coloring faintly with red, Tatsuya thought “That face is only going to make this mess bigger!” But under the circumstances where he was unwillingly being kept under constant observation, there was no way he could make that kind of condemnation.

The impasse was broken when cold words were tossed from the stage.

“That is all you want to say?”

Without anyone noticing, (probably just now) Miyuki had stood.

A cold haughty glare was piercing the upperclassman’s face.

Even from the back of the stage, no, it was more like it was due to the fact that it was coming from the stage depths; her expression clearly possessed a queen-like dignity that was merely checking for a short answer; the lips of the gossip-mongering upperclassman were sewn shut by it.

(Magic… wasn’t invoked)

The very first thing Tatsuya did was check and see if Miyuki had lost control of her magic.

This pressure wasn’t magic.

Without invoking any magic, Miyuki was radiating the freezing chill that robbed a body of its ability to move freely as in the depths of the worst of winter; even Tatsuya felt it.

“I judge that the outburst just now was an attempt to cloud the issue by vicious personal slander. Therefore, in accordance with my authority as an aide to the person in charge of keeping these proceedings on track, I order you to leave; if you have an objection to this, then you must provide a foundation for your allegation that President Saegusa holds special feelings for a particular Year One student.”

“That is…”

Naturally, Asano faltered.

From the beginning, Mayumi having special feelings for Tatsuya came from the realm of speculation; that that was the motive for the current proposal was mere slander. Even Asano, herself, was aware of this.

Miyuki’s eyes were coldly fixated on the paralyzed Asano.

There was no magic in those eyes, they were only able to contain disdain, it seemed as if that stare was able to freeze an adversary’s heart.

And it really paralyzed the agitator who was involving her older brother in slander, so her adversary was in a condition where she couldn’t move even a finger.

It wasn’t authority, rank, social class… or experience in society; those things could not really belong to a high school student. This was really a situation where the word “Dignity” can be used; it sounded so glorious.

“—I am making a correction. There is no need for you to leave. To be correct, please discontinue your questioning of this matter and return to your seat, Asano-senpai.”

The one who at last moved to take control was the person in charge of proceedings, Hattori. “At last”… well in short, he too had been overwhelmed by the pressure Miyuki was still exuding.

Miyuki bowed elegantly and returned to her chair; Asano was in no condition to give even a single word in reply and awkwardly returned to her seat.

In the end, the opposition group’s hindrance had finished with a misfire.

Afterwards, a carefree mood that wouldn’t even permit heckling permeated the lecture hall, gradually (or possibly anticlimactically), people voted electronically and the annulment of the eligibility requirement for Student Council officers was approved by a majority.

And it was finally time for Azusa’s campaign speech.

Since there was only a single candidate, it was more like a declaration of the candidate’s convictions speech, but a formal, no, a vote of confidence would be held (moreover the ballots would be actual paper ballots as opposed to electronic voting). Her face mixed with enthusiasm and tension, Azusa approached the podium. As she made her quick bow, applause broke out.

Here and there, whistles and cheers blended together, but they soon stopped as Azusa begun her speech.

Tatsuya and Miyuki were unable to understand since they paid little attention to the entertainment industry, but the cute and feminine type of song and dance girl who performed on stage had widespread fan appeal among males.

Tatsuya was still unaware of why, but without regard to her excellent grades in theory and practical skills, without bragging even a little, the modest and friendly Azusa whose face and figure were also modest and friendly throughout the school had a reputation as “an easily befriended idol”, similar but slightly different than Mayumi’s.

Surprisingly (but putting it this way might be unfair to Azusa), she presented her “politics” and “policies” eloquently. The fundamentals had been inherited from the current Student Council’s views; he was able to see a strong high school student-ish inclination toward idealism, but generally she leaned to the conservative end. — Occasionally, she would strangely pepper her speech with cheers like “Go for it” and “You can do it;” well, we all probably have eccentricities.

The storm broke out when she referred to the officers of the next Student Council.

“—I will defer that decision until the day to make the appointments; I intend to appoint highly capable people without regard to whether they are Course One or Course Two students.”

“That Course Two student~?”

“Azusa-chan likes the young and untamed type~”

The comments were truly only low level jeers. From the beginning, they were only a vulgar way for the repressed opposition group to spew out their unabated and still smoldering dissatisfaction. Possibly, they subconsciously calculated that a counterattack against Azusa was more likely to be ignored.

But, their calculations were incredibly off.

Certainly, Azusa said nothing about the insults directed at her.

“Who said that just now!” “For making fun of Nakajou-san that way!” “If you have something to say do it in front of us!” “Get the cowards!”

…Under the circumstances, she didn’t have time to say anything when the big uproar began.

In the middle of the gathering, squabbling blossomed.

The jeering opposition group and Azusa’s nearby fans became involved in a scuffle.

“Please quiet down! Return to your seats!”

“Silence please!”

“Settle down, everyone!”

Miyuki, Hattori, and Mayumi raised their voices multiple times, but the enraged students weren’t able to hear them.

The area where the scuffling was going on was gradually increasing.

The jeers, too, were gradually becoming less endurable.

Absolutely no skills were being used; the clump looked like squabbling children, but just plunging in would only result in being caught in the game of oshikuramanjuu[19].

It would be easy if you didn’t have to care about injuring anyone; however… while the difficulties of controlling the situation were making his head ache, Tatsuya made eye contact with Sawaki and Tatsumi and decided to prepare to make the plunge.

But, the decision was too late.

They were making insinuations about Tatsuya and Azusa’s relationship; the moment an exceedingly vulgar jeer emitted from the mouth of one of the opposition group, a girl’s shrill voice took command of the disturbance.

“Calm down!”

She wasn’t screeching but there had been an illusion of loudness to the voice.

The voice was not loud but, the strength of the voice made an impact on the minds of those engaged in the fracas.

Reflexively, the students eyes turned, the next instant their eyes reflexively closed, while blinking their eyes they once again begun to raise them toward the stage.

On stage, a blizzard of Psion light was running wild.

Violent rage was infringing on the world.

Modern magic was changing the world by projecting a false vision through an information body.

It wasn’t possible for magic to be invoked without an intention to guide its form.

Despite that, the chaos caused by wildly running emotions could enact that chaos on the world.

Such was the strength of the intervention power to negate common knowledge.

In this situation, no one could tell when the lecture hall was going to be smashed by ice.

Mayumi, Hattori, Suzune, and Azusa simultaneously extended hands holding out CADs upon the Queen of that World of Ice—Miyuki—to bring her under control.

—Nevertheless, the magic battle between fellow members of the Student Council in that terrible situation was fortuitously avoided at the last second.

Instantaneously, the back of a male student standing upon the stage obscured the girl’s passion from the students' field of vision.

The boy's hands were placed on both of the girl’s shoulders and the world that had been engulfed in the girl’s power and repainted looked as if it was being repressed.

What the two people said to each other or whether they conversed with their eyes alone without words could not be understood from off the stage.

Nonetheless, from the time the boy released the girl from his hands until they left the stage the gazes of the entire student body, First Years, Second Years, and Third Years locked (?) on the two of them as if they were nailed there.

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Afterwards, it was as if cold water had been thrown over everyone and order was completely restored to the gathering.

Even the jeerers were viewed like they were just rude people emboldened by a concert-like atmosphere.

The campaign speech portion solemnly disintegrated, and the students lined up to cast their ballots like tame sheep.

The ballots results would be posted the next morning after Third Years under the pay of the Student Council had finished their count.

Those results—

“Congratulations A-chan.”

“Nakajou, congratulations.”

“Congratulations, Nakajou-san.”

—Even without hearing the voices congratulating her first thing in the morning, Azusa was elected Student Council President.

“…Shiba-san, I think it’s better if you don’t pay it any attention, since the ballot doesn’t affect anything.”

“Too bad, Tatsuya-kun.”

While listening to the sympathetic voice of Suzune and, unable to keep from showing how amusing she found it, voice of Mari, the siblings with matching pained faces read the vote tabulation report.

In total, there were 554 ballots.

The number of legitimate votes was 173 ballots.

The tabulation of the ballots contents…

“…These are the results.”

“Shiba: 220, Nakajou: 173, Tatsuya-kun: 161…”

“…Wait a minute. The ballots of the large number of people who miswrote the name shouldn’t be recognized in the count…”

While crying out 'I want to pretend this doesn’t exist' without words, Miyuki calmly made an objection.

“Why are ‘The Queen’, ‘Her Majesty, the Queen’ and ‘The Snow Queen’ all being counted as votes for me?”

Miyuki cried this out in a tearful voice.

“Because on other ballots ‘Queen Miyuki’, ‘Her Majesty, Queen Shiba Miyuki’, ‘Snow Queen Miyuki’ and the like were written… there was no other way to interpret them.”

Listening to the apologetic voice of Suzune soothe her, there was no way Miyuki couldn’t understand.

“What do they mean by that? Do they think I have some sort of perverted inclinations[20]?”

“…No, I believe that they definitely don’t mean anything like that. After seeing you look like that, I don’t believe anyone would have the nerve…”

As if she had lost an inner battle, her body actually slumped as Mari contradicted her in a confused manner.

“Hey, am I that appalling? Is my demeanor really that intolerable?”

Miyuki’s tone had changed into a genuine wail.

“…Miyuki-san, calm down. After all, no one thinks that.”

Mayumi was trying with all her might to make her voice sound soothing so that she could somehow calm Miyuki’s mood, but it had almost no effect.

“Lend me the ballots! I’ll find whoever wrote them!”

“That’s absurd… in the first place, how would you do that?”

Somebody murmured this obvious flaw in her plan, but in this case, it was utterly futile.

Miyuki turned her entire body towards Tatsuya, her eyes clouded all at once.

“Onii-sama…”

With a needy look in her eyes, just as Miyuki was about to release her tears and snuggle against him, Tatsuya temporarily shelved his own disturbance.

“Do not ask for the impossible, Miyuki. Since this is a secret ballot, investigating who voted for whom is a serious violation of the rules.”

He patted her head without any trace of embarrassment and admonished her as if she were a small child.

“But… but…”

Not having a clue of what else to do, Tatsuya gently embraced his little sister who was sobbing her eyes out.

“It’s okay.”

His mouth neared the vicinity of his sister’s ear

“After all, you are not a Queen.”

And with a deeply gentle voice,

“No matter how anyone else views you, to me you are a cute princess.”

Tatsuya made that vow.

“Onii-sama…”

The sound of crying gradually ended, simultaneously it looked as if the anger and frustration were also ending, and as potential Armageddon was soothed away, everyone relaxed their tense posture.

Nevertheless, they were soon in an entirely different kind of awkward situation.

Although she stopped crying, Miyuki showed no sign of leaving Tatsuya’s arms.

Rather, her head and cheek were shockingly pressed against Tatsuya’s chest; the aura around them was so sweet that they were all suffering from heartburn.

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For the noon recess that day, the siblings, Tatsuya and Miyuki, did not show their faces in the Student Council room.

Not only did Miyuki cry in front of her senpai, she let herself be seen being embraced and comforted, so it was only natural that she was too embarrassed to come; as the seemingly unembarrassed Tatsuya had already informed them so, Mayumi and the rest were unworried.

Azusa was being honored with a celebration by her fellow second years so her seat was empty.

Suzune as usual didn’t come unless she had something to do, so she didn’t appear.

And today, unusually, Katsuto came to the Student Council room.

“Here it is.”

When the meal came to an end, Mayumi took out tea for Katsuto.

Katsuto made a silent toast and raised his teacup to his mouth.

“So, why are you here today, Juumonji?"

Although they were both guests, Mari—maybe because she couldn’t hold back any more—behaved as if they were in her own headquarters and questioned him; Katsuto gave a “no reason” type of answer.

“Perhaps, because today is for Saegusa her true retirement day. This is the last time I can come to see her in Student Council President mode.”

“I see, you came to thank Mayumi for her service or something.”

“Oh, Juumonji-kun, thank you,”

“Ah, you're welcome.”

While smiling smugly, the two of them coordinated an attack (a verbal assault?) which Katsuto solemnly rebuffed.

“…So that’s it. I thought Tatsuya-kun resembled someone; he responds to these things just like Juumonji-kun.”

“Shiba?”

'We’re alike?' Katsuto asked with a glance; Mari shrugged. Even though superficially their response was similar, Mari believed that Tatsuya’s were intentional and Katsuto’s were spontaneous, so her assessment was that their taciturnity was the only similarity.

“Speaking of Shiba, how do you think it went yesterday…”

Perhaps she believed that she couldn’t throw him off through body language alone, Mari attempted to make a swift change of topic.

“It was okay… But there was no need for us to worry.”

However, maybe because the topic on both of their minds, both Mayumi and Katsuto leaped over Mari’s choice and directed the conversation to the topic of their choice.

“I was too low to be able to really see what was going on, but did Shiba restrain his sister, just like it seemed to me?”

“Yes. Her outpouring of power and his suppression ability were unbelievable.”

It was just the way Katsuto said it was. The truth of what was going on couldn’t be discerned by those facing the stage; only those like Mayumi who were on the stage were able to clearly see what happened.

Possibly, it was a practical application of “Gram Demolition”. A structure of Psions instantly displayed—without having to work it into an information body with Eidos, Psions themselves were the

product of molded External Systematic Magic—in the form of an aura. A large amount of Psions wrapped around her running wild in a chaotic manner; that overwhelming power was compressed and poured back into Miyuki's body.

Psions were not something exuded from someone's body, but the body was the medium used for Emission or Absorption. The activation sequence formation used by CADs was an example of similar modeling.

Tatsuya had taken the Psions Miyuki had scattered around and, without any cooperation from her, poured them back "inside".

"It doesn't matter how good someone is at External Systematic Magic, it doesn't matter if they are blood relations, can someone really manipulate someone else's Psions that easily? At that time they were completely out of Miyuki's own control; that's another matter for consideration, but…"

These were a list of Mayumi's concerns.

"Wasn't that one of his ancient magic techniques? I think that there is an 'Art of the Sage' that is excellent for controlling Psions…"

Mari put forth her guesswork as an answer; however,

"No, no matter how well an ancient magic technique is mastered, it takes time to put it in motion. The Art of the Sage you're talking about is an extremely time consuming system of magic."

Katsuto indirectly refuted Mari's guess with a "that doesn't explain everything" type of answer.

"Even looking at his sister's power, as I expected, I think their genetic makeup cannot be ignored…"

"But he himself denied 'that he was a member of the ten master clans' right?"

And this time, Mari presented the counter argument to Katsuto's logic.

“Ah. He didn’t seem to be lying.”

As they ran into that dead end, Mari and Katsuto tilted their heads.

“…Let’s stop already. This conversation. It is not good to inquire about bloodlines.”

Mayumi suddenly proposed a halt.

Mari and Katsuto, both felt Mayumi’s sudden change in attitude was unnatural; however, for magicians, inquiring about bloodlines was certainly a minor crime, so they were unable to express their objections.

Of course, Mayumi did not divulge to the two of them what she was secretly thinking.

Her own belief was that if Tatsuya was an “extra”, then that inquiry was forbidden.

—And this is how Tatsuya and Mayumi, both without ever conspiring, together became co-conspirators in order to keep Tatsuya’s background concealed.

## *Afterword*

Thank you once again for picking up “Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei”. To those who say “this is my first time”, this is a good opportunity for an introduction. I am Satou Tsutomu. The fifth volume is a collection of short stories as mentioned in the fourth volume. There are five “episodes” set after the Nine Schools Competition’s end in Summer Vacation; of which one is set in between the first of September and October. While there are characters who face what one can’t call “peace”, as it’s an “adventure”, please forgive me. Especially since to them, they managed to make some good memories.

Now, to the promised(?) commentary of each “episode” of the short stories.

## Summer Break

This episode was written with the unclean desires of “I want to write a bittersweet adolescent-style story~” & “I want to write a swimsuit scene” as energy. At the time of writing, I was striking the keyboards in high spirits. The story is the type that if you wake, then you lose I think, so “here there’s an impossibility” in a part so I corrected it as a finisher.

## The Honour Student's Supplementary Lesson

The concept for this “episode” is “one way or another, I wanted to give Morisaki-kun a larger role” for his unpleasant role. He’s a kid who can do it if he tried after all. This being the case, I had him work hard.

## Amelia in Wonderland

I don’t even need to speak of the inspiration of the title. That which has the rabbit, the cards and the egg . Well, this story only has the cards appear. The day when Tomitsuka-kun becomes the rabbit will come soon I wonder. Will he be able to run from Eimi’s evil influence? … … It’s not this type of story.

## Friendship, Trust and the Dubious Lolicon

This episode is of the first year combination from Third High, Masaki and Kichijouji. Not just the dubious lolicon, but an even more grave, suspicious person is to come perhaps. Well, it’s a misunderstanding. … … Probably. To where will Kichijouji’s tomorrow lead!

## Memories of the Summer

[Summer Break] was “aim for a bittersweet episode” and in contrast, this “episode” is written to be a simple “sweet”, sugar-filled “episode”. As an author, I feel that there’s not enough “sweetness” but, what do you think? After Tantou-sama said so, I ended up shocked.

## Presidential Elections and the Queen

This is the “plus one” episode . While it’s a short story, rather than saying it’s a “side story”, it’s more of the nature of a continuation of the core, original story as a “sub episode”. … … Good Luck A-chan. Your hardships are only starting now.

Now, once again, to everyone who had something to do with this book, my thanks. Truly, thank you very much. To M-sama who fervently said stuff like “since there’s a swimsuit time , put it on the front cover!” of ambiguous meaning, I receive your association, but I must sincerely apologise. This time, even if I say so myself, the tension was weird. I’m reflecting on it. To Ishida-sama, Stone-sama, although you were very busy, thank you once again for the lovely illustrations. I watch “Aquarion Evol” every time~.

And now, to everyone who read this afterward, from my heart I thank you. I will give my very best so that next time, everyone will also think that it’s “interesting”.

(Satou Tsutomu)

## *Notes*

1. ↥ **Shiibara Tatsurou:** 椎原 辰郎 as opposed to 司波 龍郎
2. ↥ **Love:** The word she uses here is the catch-all word for love 愛する, as opposed to specifically romantic love 恋愛. Similar comparison may be philia (kindred love) and eros (passionate love).
3. ↥ The Royal Road or the Path of Kings. This can be interpreted as taking the shortest path to victory. i.e. Making preparations to ensure success, might makes right and the shortest distance between two points
4. ↥ **NG:** Short for 'no go'.
5. ↥ **Great Star of Africa:** AKA Cullinan diamond, the largest diamond ever found.
6. ↥ **OB:**Old boy
7. ↥ Takarazuka = A famous all female acting troupe where women play all the roles even the male ones in love scenes
8. ↥ Acala = A fierce guardian deity in Buddhism portrayed with an aura of fire
9. ↥ Tenketsujutsu = Probably blind spot technique
10. ↥ Mephistopheles = The tempter demon from Faust
11. ↥ Archaic Smile = This is the type of smile on ancient Greek statues
12. ↥ Ojou-sama = A daughter of an affluent upper class family.
13. ↥ Tsundere = Someone who acts cold to people they like
14. ↥ "Snow might fall" = In this region at this season, this is the near equivalent of saying pigs might fly.

15. ↥ Philosopher Stone = A mythical stone with magical properties.
16. ↥ Oba-ue = Extremely polite form of Aunt.
17. ↥ Nana = Japanese for seven.
18. ↥ Japanese word for Chinese symbol for a word or part of a word.
19. ↥ Oshikuramanjuu = A children's game in Japan that involves shoving.
20. ↥ "Perverted Inclination" = Queen can also refer to S and M Queen